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SOCIAL ACTIVISTS AND PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS

Editor
Walter Fernandes

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Social Activists and People's Movements

Search for Political and Economic Alternatives

Edited by
Walter Fernandes

Indian Social Institute
New Delhi

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Dedicated to

ANTHONY MURMU

who was killed because he gave hope of new life to the Santal tribals

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Contents

Contributors *ix*

1. WALTER FERNANDES
   Introduction: Social Activists and the Search for Alternatives 1
2. H. VOLKEN
   Action Groups: Beginning or End of a Dream? 13
3. SUJATA GOTHOSKAR AND VIJAY KANHERE
   The Role of Women in Social Change and People's Movements 32
4. WALTER FERNANDES
   External Support for Action Groups: The Role of Macro-Organisations 48
5. ROSS KIDD AND MAMUNUR RASHID
   People's Theatre and Landless Organising in Bangladesh 61
6. WALTER FERNANDES
   Some Dilemmas Facing Action Groups: Reactions From Activists 88
7. UPENDRA BAXI
   Law, Struggle and Change: An Agendum for Activists 110

REACTIONS FROM SCHOLAR ACTIVISTS

8. AJIT ROY
   Activist Groups: Fundamental Issues 129

9. Bunker Roy
Confessions of a Non-Aligned Activist 134

10. H. Sethi
An Ode to Hurt Innocence: An Appeal to Friends in Social Action Groups 141

11. Ginny Shrivastava
Social Activists, People's Movements and Indian Women 145

12. Philip Viegas
Catalysts of a People's Movement 155

WRITERS REPLY

A. Vijay Kanhere and Sujata Gothoskar
Indian Women: Issues of Struggle 168

B. Nimai Bhai
People's Movements, Social Activists and National Problems 170

C. Rajesh Tandon
Emerging Concerns of Social Action Groups in India 172

D. Nalini Nayak
Complex Issues 174

E. Walter Fernandes
Going Beyond Present Issues 175

References 177

Index 183

1

Introduction: Social Activists and the Search for Alternatives

Walter Fernandes

Disillusioned with the present economic growth model of development and the vote bank-oriented political parties, thousands of young men and women fled to the rural areas in the 1960s and early 70s to form what are called action groups. It was hoped that the involvement of committed urban middle class youth in the life of the rural poor who have till now been neglected by all including political parties, was the harbinger of a new era of rural transformation.

This development was a natural result of the process set in motion by the five year plans that assumed that transfer of technology and of financial resources would automatically lead to the elimination of poverty. The decision makers did not take into consideration the power structures that ensured the continuation of inequalities and the control of assets and income by a small minority at the cost of the majority (Fernandes 1985: 16-7). The economic crisis of the late 1960s, the political realignment and manipulation followed by the crisis of the 1970s and the State of Emergency were an eye opener to hundreds of university students who were exposed to the rural reality through reformatory measures such as the National Service Scheme (NSS). Reflection on this reality led them to realise that

> most technical, organisational and educational inputs tend to reach only those who already have something, that the distance between the dominant sections of society and the dependent groups has increased, and that the situation of the latter has deteriorated (Fernandes 1981: 35).

These young men and women disillusioned with the alliance of convenience even of leftist parties and deterioration of the status of the poor decided to opt for alternate forms of development. From the beginning the work of these youth who formed what are known as *Action Groups* has been surrounded by controversies. Some hailed them as signs of a new future because a large number of these young men and women gave up good prospects within the present system in favour of micro-level involvement among the landless agricultural labourers, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and other unorganised sectors of the rural poor who were beyond the purview even of leftist political parties. Others felt that they could not make their presence felt at the national level since they did not align themselves with the left and democratic forces who alone could ultimately lead to major changes in our society. In fact, relations with political parties is one factor that has caused major conflicts within action groups and has broken many of them. Often ideological issues and personality conflicts have gone hand in hand.

These are the questions we are trying to discuss in this book. As Ajit Roy says in his paper published here, the questions tend to be repetitive. The same qestions that had been asked for the last five years are perhaps repeated again. This is natural because after the initial fervor, time has come to sit back and reflect on the impact of this search for alternatives. In other words, the main question we are asking here is whether the hopes have been belied or whether something has changed in favour of the marginalised sections as a result of the involvement of the action groups.

New initiatives

To understand this question it is important to repeat with Nalini Nayak that action groups cannot be taken as a homogeneous entity. The difference between various types of groups has to be borne in mind if one is not to exaggerate either their success or failures. What is important to bear in mind is that when they first entered the field social activists took new intiatives, both in

the form of methods and strategies of involvement and as regards the groups with which they worked. As most writers in this book repeat, they worked among groups that had been ignored by all including political parties.

This thrust towards new initiatives continues today. It is true that many questions asked tend to be repetitive. But while asking these questions one cannot forget that they have to be answered in the context of many new initiatives they have been taking even in this decade. As an example one may mention that while the effort of the dominant sections during the last ten years has been to de-politicise the masses, many of these groups have succeeded in politicising issues till then considered non-political. Such for example are groups dealing with questions such as women's rights (Omvedt and Rao 1985), health (Narayan 1985), environment (Agarwal 1984), forests (Fernandes and Kulkarni 1983) etc. Thus one cannot say that action groups as such have stagnated but that some of them have been able to show new directions which others have followed. However, the majority among them probably need a new direction.

Their impact and reaction

That even while being few they have made some impact is clear both from the reaction of the government and of political parties of the right and of the left. As reaction of the government one may mention its efforts to control voluntary agencies by depriving them of access to financial resources and efforts to coopt them into the system by promising them a place in the implementation of goverment sponsored programmes. When these efforts have not succeeded, the government has attempted alternative forms of marginalising them through judicial enquiries (e.g. the Kudal Commission) or by supporting a few at the cost of others. Such for example, is the support given to some agencies organising landless labour for fair wages while violently putting down other groups like the *Ryot Coolie Sangham* in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere. The Foreign Contribution Act, 1976 and the modification of the Income Tax Act section 35 cc in 1983 that removed income tax exemption on industrial contribution for rural development and the amendment to the Foreign Contributions Act 1984 can be mentioned as efforts to deprive the voluntary organisations of

their financial sources and when that is not possible, to control them or coopt them (*Lokayan* 1985).

Their impact can also be seen from the reaction of political parties both of the right and of the left. The rightist parties, particularly the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) which by and large supports the traditional vested interests, have tried to give a communal turn to the controversy. This in itself is not surprising because the use of religion and other emotional issues by the leaders in their struggle for supremacy is an accepted fact today. Whether one refers to the Bhiwandi riots, the Punjab problem, the Delhi massacres, or the Gujarat anti-reservation struggle, one realises that these are in fact conflicts between the vested interests who are either attempting to keep their hold on economic or political power or are attempting to wrest it from others. Emotional issues function as rallying points in such struggles to get the support of the masses (Ahmad 1983: 443-452).

The RSS is able to give the issue a communal colour since a relatively large number of social activists particularly in Tamilnadu and Kerala are Christinas by birth. Though most of these activists are themselves marginalised within the Church Institution, the RSS tries to present them as part of the effort of the Church to convert India to Christianity. This, for example, is the stand of S.K. Agrawal (1983: 117-137) who looks at recent trends as the 'Church going political.' Liberation Theology that has been used by activists in Latin America as a support for people's struggles is presented by the author as one more tool "in the interest of the survival and expansion of the Church base in Third World countries" (ibid: 121). Action groups are viewed as "groups led by Christain activists under the cover of rural development for Church Missionary activities" (ibid: 124). Liberation Theology is viewed by G.N. Singhal (1983) as a mode of coopting revolutionary struggles in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere. Though a large number of activists in India have developed their own form of Liberation Theology, the author presents it as a result of a strategy of International Christian Organisations to penetrate the Third World. He alleges that by controlling their purse strings, international organisations like the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Vatican and others manipulate the action groups for evangelical purposes. Briefly, attention is diverted from the vested interests against whom the marginalised groups, supported by the social

activists, wage a struggle for their rights. Such use of religion as a rallying point enables the vested interests to suppress the marginalised groups in their struggle for a more human existence and at the same time get the support of the masses in the name of 'danger to religion'.

On the other hand, the leftist parties that have certainly been instumental in creating a great amount of consciousness among the people, seem to feel that action groups at times erode their mass base. Thus the 1981 Politburo resolution of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) warned its cadres against involvement with the action groups. Prakash Karat has taken this attack one step further by presenting them as one more aspect of the strategy of the imperialist powers to coopt Third World leadership. Words such as grass roots involvement are presented by him as "a favoured word in imperialist jargon picked up by our action groups" (Karat 1984: 25). People's Movements, People's Organisations etc. are presented as catch words which were

> not a wholly indigenous process as sought to be projected by the ideologues of this movement. It is not as if many of the 'development' groups at the grass-roots level realised the futility of the earlier approach, got radicalised by their experience and decided to organise the people to fight exploitation and the vested interests. The imperialist funding agencies and the think-tanks of imperialism also came to the same conclusions and influenced many of the voluntary agencies to take on the 'activist' role of the second phase. During this period from 1975-76 all the major donor agencies listed in their funding programmes the object of not only assisting developmental activities but also steps to organise and educate the 'absolute poor' (ibid: 25).

The fact that a relatively large number of activists are Christians was not forgotten. This fact is put against the traditional conflict between the Institutional Church and Marxist parties. Secondly, it is alleged that

> the Christian action groups which claim to be radical seek to pit their following against the organised left because of a profound ideological incompatibility which emanates from the very theory that they propagate. They view the Communist Party and its mass organisations as manipulators of the masses, creating dependent groups leading to burcaucratic control and imitating the 'culture of repression' of the rightists. What is sought to be offered instead is an individualised variety of christian reformism (ibid: 32).

Briefly, the left parties seem to be afraid of the erosion of their support base when in fact they should have thought of alliances rather than opposition. However, the author recognises that "there is no doubt that in some areas, particularly where the left is weak, many young and idealistic persons are drawn into the network of these agencies" (ibid: 50). In other words, action groups are able to work where there is some political consciousness but parties are generally ineffective.

The relevance of action groups

In other words though their impact in terms of numbers is limited, social activists have been able to spur at least some groups into action either by attempting to coopt them or control them and possibly leading to some healthy changes in the political system.

These are the questions discussed in this book. First of all as mentioned earlier, one needs to bear in mind that voluntary organisations and action groups are not homogeneous but cover a wide range of activities and ideologies. Some of them are front organisations of political parties or even of reactionary groups. Most of them are, to quote Kothari (1984) non-party political forces (NPPF). Others think that they thrive as a result of the failure of the Left to capitalise on the present crisis (Joseph and Desrochers 1985: 40). Nobody denies that they are political in nature (Sheth 1984: 24). In fact, it is even claimed that they create "new political spaces for themselves, often inviting the wrath of the government as well as political parties" (Sheth 1982: 50). Others refer also to their strategy.

> Some of them tend to concentrate only on political education to the exclusion of economic inputs, for fear that they may obstruct a genuine educational process. Some others feel that an economic or technical component should be used as a tool for education and that the weakest sections are often unable to become active without some economic support (Fernandes 1981: 27).

There are other groups that cannot be classified. These refer in particular to groups involved in human rights, ecological questions, health issues, legal aid, feminist problems, alternative political approach etc (Joseph and Desrochers 1985: 43).

Most authors in this book discuss the questions mentioned

here. Volken asks whether the action groups have belied the hopes of those who thought of them as an alternative. What is clear is that action groups work at the micro-level and among the sections of the populations that have so far been ignored by others. Hence, others like Fernandes discuss the question of macro-support and the role of external organisations. Bunker Roy would think that not sufficient attention is paid to the people while discussing the activists. Others like Sethi would think that discussion on action groups is both a sign of hope and of despair.

Also the shortcomings of groups are discussed. The question that Kanhere and Ghotoskar would ask is whether while working for social change, the activists have limited themselves to change in the status of men and have ignored the rights of women. Will this lead to the improvement of men at the cost of women? This question needs to be taken seriously, because studies have shown that just as with the present pattern of development the dominant sections have strengthened themselves at the cost of the already marginalised groups, often social change that ignores sex discrimination can result in men acquiring their rights at the cost of women. While class difference is crucial, other aspects of inequality and injustice cannot be ignored (de Souza 1980: 7-9). Other questions on methods like people's theatre, the role of foreign aid, the risks of outside intervention are discussed by Kidd, Rashid, Tandon, Nayak, Pradhan, Pandey and others. The problems concerning the involvement of political parties are discussed by Manohar, Nayak and above all Ajit Roy. Nimai Bhai searches for an answer in the context of the role of the action groups on the national scene. While accepting the need of such a national involvement, Ginny Srivastava would once again focus attention on the role of women and the right strategy to involve them in the struggle, not merely as helpers of men but as persons in their own right. Upendra Baxi studies the role of activists in the liberation struggle of the poor and the role of law in it.

This book is meant to be more a discussion on the role of social activists than an answer to questions asked. It is precisely because of this that difference of opinion has been kept intact. The book began as a series of articles in the special issue of *Social Action* (April-June 1984) on 'Social Activists and People's Movements.' The papers by Volken, Kidd and Rashid, Kanhere and Ghotoskar and Fernandes are part of this issue. The review

was circulated to five different persons for reaction. These are the papers of Ajit Roy, Bunker Roy, Harsh Sethi, Ginny Srivastava and Philip Viegas. These reactions were sent to the original writers some of whom replied to them. We find these replies at the end of the book. The paper by Upendra Baxi is taken from the April-June 1985 issue of *Social Action* which was a special issue on "Law and Social Change."

Need of rethinking

The writers differ in their outlook on the social activists. However, all are agreed that in the beginning i.e. in the 1960s and 1970s, the action groups gave some hope of providing an alternative to the present economic and political system. Some like Nimai Bhai think that even today voluntary organisations provide the Third Force because whatever their colour, the present political parties have become part of the system in some form of the other. By saying this they do not imply that there is no difference whatever between the rightist and the leftist parties but only that in some form or the other they have to think in terms of the elections and vote banks. As a result, their alliances do not go down to the most marginalised groups who can be taken for granted and manipulated by those slightly above them.

In other words, while differing in their approach to many questions, all are agreed that the activists have attempted to get involved with the most marginalised groups. Some like Bunker Roy would claim that they are in fact involved with "the last but one man." But he too would not deny that the activists have gone towards those who have been ignored by everyone else.

While agreeing that the beginning of the action groups was a major new initiative, the writers are not unanimous on their relevance today. The opinions range from those who think that they have become irrelevant to those who still feel that with some effort they can become the Third Force. However, most writers feel that though today there is the danger of the action groups getting marginalised, they should not be given up as lost. As mentioned earlier, several groups have taken new initiatives even in this decade and have been politicising apparently non-political issues even when the ruling classes have been attempting to de-politicise the masses.

Those who speak of the role of external agents in supporting them in their search for alternatives, assume that the action groups cannot be given up as irrelevant. By and large the question of external support tends to come down to the micro-macro discussion and to the issue concerning political alliance. Though the problem of alliances has been dealt with again and again, very little headway has been made mainly because it tends to get bogged down in polemics. Both, persons speaking on behalf of political parties and those searching for a non-party alternative, have tended to condemn one another rather than see the possibilities of new initiatives in their relations. This perhaps is a sign of the fear of the unknown (Joseph and Desrochers 1985: 66-71).

The main discussion has been whether the search for alternatives and the change of the system should be primarily in the direction of capturing state power. If that were the only alternative, then there would be no choice but to go along with the parties. But it is precisely the methods and what they considered unprincipled alliances of the 60s and 70s used in the hope of capturing state power that disillusioned the youth who fled to the rural areas in search of other forms of involvement. The same fear keeps many of them only at the micro-level without viewing their local involvement in a macro-perspective (Kothari 1984: 50-51).

The main fear of both sides is cooptation. The political parties think that working only at the micro-level without any party support will automatically lead to the local groups being coopted by the larger system since in the absence of any other democratic support, they will have no choice but to fall in the hands of the ruling classes even while keeping up an external appearance of radicalism. Those opposed to involvement with parties are afraid precisely of being coopted by the political parties themselves. Even Prakash Karat acknowledges at least indirectly that action groups have come up where the leftist parties had left a void (Karat 1984: 48-50). The activists fear that if they invite political parties to their area, they will in fact make use of their base among the most marginalised groups as vote banks and may not always help with people's organisations. In fact some groups like *Bhoomi Sena* were born as a result of the disillusionment with party cadres who were earlier active among them (Rahman 1981: 3-7).

Whatever the case, it is obvious that the question of alliances with political parties is dividing a large number of groups. Such a division can only favour the *Status Quo*. Though the parties may gain some votes, in the long run it is the vested interests that are bound to reap the benefits. If the change of the social system in favour of the most marginalised groups is the real objective, then in the question of alliances new initiatives may have to be taken. Critical collaboration has been mentioned by many as a possible alternative. Given the polemical atmosphere, the time does not seem to be ripe for what may be the only possible alternative. The concept itself needs to be better defined if one is to get out of the polemical atmosphere into new initiatives. Without re-thinking on the question of macro-support and alliances, there is the danger of many action groups getting de-politicised though action for social change is essentially political. Similarly, the parties can easily become a middle class phenomenon and work only for their interests against the marginalised sections. Wielenga (1981: 201-202) is probably right when he says:

> One would hope that they (action groups) will not respond to the sectarianism of the big party with the sectarianism of the small group. . . . Short-term hopes of fruitful co-operation with established leftist parties have to be given up. This gives further importance to the various efforts to come to a coordination of local groups on the national level. Such a coordination is certainly welcome, provided it is not based on the illusion that these groups can offer an alternative all on their own while ignoring the traditional organisations of the working class, and provided that a serious effort is made to come to political and ideological clarification. What is needed is a thorough process of common interaction and reflection in which the political and ideological options are clearly identified.

Apart from the question of relations with parties, there is need of rethinking on several other aspects such as the methodology of work with the people, stability and mobility of groups etc. No definite answers can be given concerning questions such as the danger of dependency, security of activists, withdrawal of groups from an area etc. Various alternatives have been discussed in this book. While Bunker Roy would think that dependency is not such an evil after all, others like Tandon and Volken would feel that continuing this type of dependency could become one more way

of supporting the present system instead of working for major structural changes.

Also the question of the security of the activists cannot be considered closed forever. Here too there would be difference of opinion between Bunker Roy, Nimai Bhai, Jagdish Pradhan, Rajesh Tandon, Henry Volken and Walter Fernandes. Some would think that security should not be viewed only from the material point of view. By the very fact of involvement with the marginalised sections, the activist is in an extremely insecure situation. Hence, there is little sense in adding to it the material insecurity of the activists and of his/her family. For example, as Kanhere, Ghotoskar and Srivastava state, any woman who gets involved in active work among the marginalised groups, puts herself in an extremely insecure position socially and culturally. One needs to have a strong character to resist the social pressures against their involvement. Should material insecurity to be added to this?

As already mentioned, another question that needs to be tackled with a sense of urgency is the role of women in social change. A very large number of action groups still tend to remain male-dominated. Obviously, one needs to make a deeper analysis of questions such as the multi-class involvement of women. But this is not peculiar only to women but to all the marginalised groups. Kanhere and Ghotoskar would think that one should begin with issues that are common to all classes of women. But Srivastava and others would disagree with this and think that concentration should be on questions such as the power of knowledge, ownership and other factors that affect the weaker sections among them more than the others. While more reflection is needed on the type of involvement, what is clear that most activists have to rethink the whole question of the role they assign to women. Unless they think of change of the system to the benefit of both sexes from the weaker sections, they run the risk of perpetuating discrimination against women even while changing it in favour of men.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above discussion is that the question of the relevance, strategy and the future of the action groups is not closed. In the absence of other alternatives, they still give some hope of a new beginning. The marginalised groups that had so

far been ignored by all, have to some extent become relevant at least in part because of them. Apparently non-political issues have taken a political dimension, thanks to their presence, It is in this context that the discussion on their future should be situated. There is the danger of the discussion being conditioned by various vested interests both of the action groups and of the political parties. For either the political party or the action group to be relevant, it is important to reaffirm once again that the primary objective of those working for social change is people's move ments, in particular among the most marginalised groups. Situating the discussion on the micro-macro perspective, on the approach and strategy within this context can help with ideological clarity which is needed if a relevant strategy for the attainment of these objectives is to be worked out.

2

Action Groups: Beginning or End of a Dream?

H. Volken

Thousands of young men and women are today involved with the rural poor all over the country. Many of them are field workers in well organised traditional N.G.O.'s but an even larger number constitute the action groups which have become the centre of attention in the development debate. It is they who dared to enter into the life reality of the poor and the oppressed, and have attempted to raise the voice of the voiceless. They appeared on the horizon of the Indian scene as a new creative force when, despite remarkable development achievements, the situation of the masses of the rural poor grew more desperate. Coming mostly from a stratum of society which shares in the growing affluence of a relatively small minority in the country, they were shocked at the massive violation of human rights of those who had been promised a new future when they actually experienced grassroots reality.

Action groups are part of a wider movement in search of new forms of social and political action through which the masses of the people would move from the periphery to the centre of development and political processes. It had become increasingly clear that political parties were not achieving this. So, a constantly increasing number of action groups got involved with the 'victims of

development,' set on achieving the objective of 'people's education and people's organisation.'

A good deal has been published with the intention to evaluate the significance and the performance of action groups. The images about them emerging from the many studies and articles vary greatly. Some write them off as of little significance for a socio-political transformation of society. Others lay stress on the unique value of the experience gained in close contact with the marginalised poor (Kothari 1984; Volken, Kumar and Kaithathara 1982). Still others see in them real possibilities of making a contribution to a new political future (Sheth 1982; Fernandes 1982). The views expressed in these studies are, of course, conditioned by the ideology, the perception of the Indian situation, the accuracy of information obtained, and the opinion about the importance of grassroots social and political processes each author has. The more radical writers are divided on the stand taken about the 'non-party political formations.' Leftist party members assert that only under the leadership of the party can micro-level action have any significance (John 1982). The others nuance this in terms of sincere collaboration or raise serious doubts about the 'liberative character' of the existing leftist parties (Pendse, Roy and Sethi 1982; Roy 1982; Kulkarni 1983). Among the believers in 'integrated development,' the tendency is to relate the importance of action groups to the openness of the System. This conviction is most strongly expressed by Bunker Roy (1983), who seems convinced that action groups are called upon to help in the implementation of 'Integrated Rural Development.'

This article views action groups from the perspective of their 'histories.' It is inspired by a hope that their future is not the 'end of a dream.' It is meant as a contribution to the ongoing dialogue and search for clarity, and as a service to the introspection carried out within action groups themselves. It does not intend to raise all the important issues that need to be clarified, but rather focuses on some negative tendencies which can be observed in action groups, and need to be scrutinised and overcome. The diagnosis is made for the purpose of healing. The main assertion of this article is that *action groups have been successful in only a limited way to develop an adequate methodology of working with the people which leads to the emergence of autonomous, strong and lasting people's movements.* The 'tendencies' discussed here

are seen as linked to this crucial issue. Some of the action groups may not recognise themselves in this analysis. It has, however, a solid base, not only in my own observations, but also in that of some of the studies mentioned, and of persons who have been in close contact with action groups, especially in the south of the country where these are the most numerous.

Splintering of action groups

The most striking 'disease' which has been afflicting action groups is their susceptibility to splintering. The widespread inability to build up unity and strength within the 'core group' is in contradiction with the professed central aim of building up unity and solidarity among the unorganised rural poor so that they may gain political weight. Discussing this with a friend having extensive first-hand knowledge of such grassroot groups, we arrived at the following conclusions:

(a) If an action group really is succeeding in bringing to life, and in nurturing a regional people's movement through a cadre emerging from among them, the core group cannot split. The qualities of its relationship with the people will prevent this from happening. The link with the new leadership and the awakened people would be so deep that tensions, arising within the group itself would all along be faced successfully.

(b) The very vitalisation of the people's and the movement's culture would have unity and solidarity as its central value, emerging as such also from the gained political perspective. The ongoing educational and organisational process depends for its success on the internalisation of this value. It provides the inner strength of a movement that constantly has to face forces of obstruction, punishment and suppression. In such a context, any step of separating and moving away from the movement, taken by some of the members of the team committed to the cause, would be looked upon as betrayal. An even more serious betrayal would take place if, because of internal tensions, the entire core group would split and leave before the organisation of the people has taken root among them. If the people are on the way of giving themselves local and regional structures, then there is no base for a team in solidarity with them to unilaterally decide to withdraw.

It is indeed disconcerting that even action groups who seemed

best equipped to enable the rural poor and oppressed to reach new levels of consciousness, achieve organisational strength and gain political weight, have in the long run faltered and even left behind an unfinished task. On reading *Roots of a Peasant Movement*, and contrasting its contents with the reality in the field, one cannot help thinking that here is an example of such a development (Weid and Poitevin 1980). Initially the orientation and strategy, and especially the degree of courage and commitment of such groups, provoked admiration. During the first years of involvement, their reports were impressive. Then although the reports continued to be impressive, one tended to believe that something was kept hidden. Definitely, something was going wrong. Instances of such a sequence of events are many. What is the explanation for this? Is it an excessive activism that prevented the group from progressively developing a theory on the basis of experience and reflection? Was there, right from the start, a built-in obstacle that prevented a genuine two-way communication between the action group and the people, to develop? Was there a lack of balance in the life-style of the group that impeded the members to come to terms with themselves as persons and with oppressive personality traits? Was the strong personality of the group leader, possibly a *guru* figure, blocking democratisation within the team? Is it the cerebral development, a result of advanced formal education, which made it impossible to be attuned to the people of a totally different type of intelligence in which heart and head are still in harmony? I see all these factors related to the one crucial issue of developing an adequate methodology of working with the people, enabling them to grow in self-confidence, in decision-making capacity, and in organising themselves for collective action, gaining increasingly a mature political perception. People on the way to social liberation, face in their struggles continuous demands for courage, self-giving, 'suffering' and for overcoming divisive forces from within and from without. If, at every stage, the new leadership cannot inspire them, the people cannot 'keep going.' Working in such an atmosphere with people provides the strongest motivation to the 'animators of the animators' to overcome divisions among themselves.

In my limited experience, I find the above assumption confirmed. In our own team (MOTT) and in groups close to us, I could observe that the inner strength and unity of the group grew in the

measure that the people's organisations in question grew themselves in strength to withstand divisive forces in very difficult circumstances. In one such organisation that came to life in the hills of Southwest Orissa, covering tribals and harijans of about 120 villages, the core team has remained the same since the start and is more united than ever. In our own group, a new spirit has come to unite us, especially as a result of and the challenge from the ever more painful struggle of CKMS, an organisation of landless and bonded labourers we have been working with. For the 'how' of this process, I can only give here one example. A member of MOTT had been seized by the police together with a local member. Handcuffed, they were taken to the Taluka Court. After a prolonged drama of fabricating a case against them and the CKMS, the two were eventually bailed out by a local friend. On being set free, they both proceeded to the village of the secretary of the *Sangh*, who had been beaten unconscious and jailed previously. He, too, on that occasion, had got out on bail. Now the two entered the home of this courageous secretary. He was absent at the moment and his wife greeted both of them. They told her, 'You must be feeling bad for all the trials that your husband has to go through.' She answered, 'You rather must be feeling bad for having been thrown into jail and taken handcuffed to court. We have to bear all this. My husband is not a thief. If he has to suffer this for his people what is there to be ashamed of? Do not worry about us. What my husband does he has to do for the people'.

I am sure that many groups can testify to this fact that it is the people who hold the core group together. In a similar way, they can confirm that in such circumstances, clashes between personalities appear to be a ridiculous game, and the hunger for personal power as much a contradiction with the aspirations among the people. Identification with the people is not so much a 'physical issue' as a much more important matter of mind and heart. When these attitudes do not develop in the action group itself, a decisive pre-condition for an adequate methodology of working with the people to develop is non-existent. Group dynamics, T.A., and other such exercises which help to deal with inter-personal conflicts, can bring some remedy. Yet, it should be well understood, that the heart of the matter is to be found elsewhere—where people can heal us!

In this context the understanding of the process under discussion by Paulo Freire becomes very relevant. What is at stake, according to him, is the willingness of middle-class people, to die to their class values and culture.' Only when this happens, can there be a real identification and effective communication with the oppressed and a resurrection, with them to a new social existence. The majority of the activists, just as we, have a middle class origin. However much they feel in their ideology estranged from this social background and even their families, in many layers of their being they remain deeply marked by the the culture, the way of 'evaluating,' of feeling and of reacting, in which they have been nurtured from their early childhood. There is no 'low cost project' ahead of them after a radical option has been made. Acquiring new ideas, even through serious social analysis, will not be sufficient. Even among the people, ideology only 'works' if embedded in a vitalised popular culture, a new way of life. Neither can a serious exercise of 'psychological and spiritual healing' by itself provide the required transformation. In any case, the removal of conflicts within a middle class group does not lead far. The liberation from the big package of 'middle class being,' largely unnoticed, cannot take place outside a common search with the people. This implies that the very methodology, central in this article, develops in and through a process of interaction. Here is revealed the deeper meaning of action-reflection, excluding any, even hidden, form of manipulation. This method of 'mutual learning,' brought to people by the action group, can be vitiated from the very beginning, and risks remaining far from good.

From liberation to development

Another trend that is observed among action groups is in the option for development projects and increased dependency on outside financial aid. Often it all started with an almost dogmatic stand that true activists cannot indulge in promoting economic projects, little aware that economic initiatives, guided by a clear perspective, can also serve the people's political education. A subsequent retreat, under various pressure, from the original concern to prevent any sort of economism' to develop, has in many instances led to growing readiness to accept outside financial assistance. The initial fear got lost. The 'success' of the movement required money. If the full-time animators do not get better

remuneration, their motivation will weaken. The requirements of the core group go on increasing. Without transport facilities, the contract with the expanding village units will remain week. To become more self-reliant the group needs some source of income. Land has to be bought, and perhaps a couple of cross-bred cows. In the course of time, some get married and living quarters have to be constructed. Eventually, there also arises the need for a training centre. The action group has thus come to acquire considerable assets, and has a number of people on its payroll.

Some factors that press the group in this direction need compassionate consideration. Because of the extreme poverty and exploitation of the people, the action groups vividly realise the need of the people to both struggle for justice and resist the locally powerful. Before long, they come to realise not only the prevailing powerlessness of the poor but also their own serious vulnerability. Although ruling political parties have championed the need of the rural poor, mostly *Harijans* and tribals, to establish their own organisations, the actual success in this is viewed differently. Political power is first a local reality, and is shared by people very much in need of cheap labour. From this level, information flows up to higher levels where it is so easily believed that 'Naxalites' have come to instigate the people and threaten law and order. It is sufficient for some local paper to print a distorted report about the disturbance of peace by some group 'come from outside, to make their existence in the area almost impossible. Raids by the police, imprisonment and even beatings have taken place. More often, however, it is the people who get the punishment. As one of them remarked, 'It is always we who get the beating.' Whatever the case, an atmosphere of gloom develops and the project of 'power to the people and transformation of society' appears to be an unrealistic and hopeless enterprise. It is easy for theoreticians living in security to put the blame for subsequent developments on lack of 'socialist ideology.' Today, agencies are willing to support 'programmes of conscientisation,' and then the shift to development projects can take place under a respectable label. As even economic development is hard to achieve, the temptation to secure at least self-development is real. Extensive travel to attend seminars, and even to indulge in fund-raising abroad, are but natural consequences. Some eventually succeed in obtaining a scholarship for studies abroad, or opt without this interlude, for a more gainful career back in the system.

Foreign aid

Easily available foreign aid affects the destiny of action groups in many ways. As indicated already, it easily leads to the accumulation of assets of action groups, and their search for greater security. It also often plays a decisive role in the breaking up of groups. The current willingness of aid-giving agencies to financially support 'conscientisation' programmes encourages enterprising members of action groups to replicate the 'movement' in another area.

In both cases, the victim is the people's movement. The growth that should lead to its cultural vitality and political strength, gets disturbed. It is, of course, possible to work with small 'users' groups' and aid such target groups with financial inputs to increase their production. International aid-giving agencies are very much interested in supporting this type of strategy against rural proverty. Isolated successes of this type bypass conveniently the key issue of societal transformation, which implies the creation of a new political force through organisations in each region of all the 'victims of development.' From these quarters, the thesis has spread that the rural poor must first acquire economic strength to reach the position from which they can exercise political power and claim their fundamental rights. This view has found wide currency among non-governmental aid giving agencies in the West. Whilst in the case of the first, there is no doubt about the ultimate aims, the second are rather caught in the mainstream of current international ideas of the 'target group approach' to rural development in developing countries. It is further important to note, that those who have been instrumental for action groups in India to obtain easy financial support, were mainly 'deviant' representatives of their own organisations abroad. Such individuals discovered in the early seventies the emerging action groups. They did all they could to bypass rules and regu lations of their organisation when on a trip to India. Action groups appeared to be the real thing, and they had to be assisted at all costs. Among them, those with the ability of critical observation are getting increasingly disillusioned. In the meantime, the shift from liberation to development had advanced far among quite a number of groups. Many new initiatives start off from this point. With the traditional development projects having fallen in disfavour, all

this creates a welcome opening for foreign assistance to deviant action groups.

The experience in MOTT has been that those people's organisations which have gained the greatest internal strength are those in whose development the least amount of outside finances have been utilised. The CKMS has all along covered expenses for training, orientation sessions, legal camps, and one-night meetings of bonded labourers, from their own resources. Meals were prepared by pooling the paddy each one would bring along. It is only after the organisation has grown, and become a threat to the regional vested interests, that the need for aid has arisen. Lawyers have to be paid for bailing out of courts of 'justice,' leaders and members falsely implicated on fabricated accusations.

The pressure for utilising outside financial aid is greater when the movement is constituted mainly by small and marginal farmers, as is the case with tribals. Instead of promoting the development of the resources of the people in a frame of organic farming, a programme of a 'thousand wells' and modern farming looks more attractive. The larger the amount of foreign aid involved, even if for obtaining more readily access to public development resources, the greater the likelihood of exposing the weaker member to great risks of loss and creating a new privileged group. More serious even is the risk of leaving people with the illusion that 'integration into development' is possible, and of minimising the people's efforts to discover the structural causes of their poverty and the irrelevance of the development policy that is essentially oriented towards production increase for the market. The negative impact on developing the people's resources needs to be seen also from this angle, where the potential of people for reaching a level of critical understanding of society and its many exploitative mechanisms keeping them in poverty remains undeveloped.

It is more difficult to be specific about the use of outside funds for the maintenance of action groups themselves. Probably, all exist directly or indirectly on such outside assistance. It is difficult to envisage a possibility of their financial dependence on the people. The people willingly share with visiting activists the little they have, but they cannot regularly contribute towards the maintenance of a group consisting of several individuals. If the action group has to produce for its own upkeep, this again requires

initial investment, and hire of labour. The situation of those groups that are supported by funds received from outside and have adopted a simple life-style, is less ambiguous. There are many such groups which with such an arrangement, have remained very credible to the people.

Training teams, training centres, and institutions offering other support to action groups, are also mostly dependent on foreign aid. Probably only a few of these could remain in existence without this aid. Does this necessarily limit their freedom? There is clear evidence that this does not need to be so. It is mainly in instances where pre-planned and approved targets have to be achieved to secure the approval of donors that constraints from outside are created. Not only in genuine action groups which enable the people to determine policies, but also in organisations and institutions which respond to demands of a just social order, any sort of outside pressure is unacceptable.

The problem of security

It is among action groups that one often finds persons least concerned about personal financial security. This is a trait peculiar to generous youth. It, however, also has its dangers. I know of several individuals who, after a number of years of involvement with the rural poor, find themselves caught in a blind alley. Some would like to get married, but cannot afford to do so. Some need to take up a job, but cannot find any more an 'entry point.' Still others got married to one of the team members, and both of them are getting greatly worried about their children and family security. In this and many other ways, young people arrive at the conclusion that they have no right to throw their family into a situation of total insecurity. Often, members of action groups feel obliged to leave their group for such considerations and not for lack of motivation or commitment. This indicates that low remuneration is not an essential pre-condition for high motivation. There is much evidence to the contrary, that deep commitment can go along with a remuneration that is equal to a fair salary. This need not affect the simplicity of life-style as I have often observed. Some savings can be made for the future family obligations. There is less anxiety about eventually taking up a job in a society in which capability is often judged from the

amount earned on the previous employment. In discussions about this real problem of security, one misses often the insistence on the fact that genuine commitment is primarily determined by the *quality of relationship with the people* and not by the amount of remuneration received. Where this relationship lacks depth and sincerity, there abuse of funds, whatever the source, creeps in. It is there, too, that no development of a real people's movement takes place.

Difficulties in establishing links

The more radically committed action groups have in an often painful way discovered the magnitude of the forces operating against them and movement gaining organisational strength. The consciousness for the need of creating links and establishing linkages has grown much in the course of these years. The need felt by groups, to link up with other similar groups in the region or in the state, has been forcefully expressed at many meetings. Efforts to achieve this have been made in many parts of the country, both by action groups themselves, as well as by outside supporters. Only a few of these have proved successful, and have led to the establishment of lasting federations. This has surprised many. Occasional meetings are appreciated, but permanent links are feared. Why this reluctance and over-concern with keeping one's identity as a specific group?

Unity among action groups has only meaning if there are common basic elements of an ideology of justice and of critical anlysis of society. It would seem that the majority of activists have received their orientation in this from similar sources. Some therefore, attribute the cause of this reluctance to join in with the other groups to a quest for self-aggrandisement. There may be a good deal of truth in this explanation. I see the main cause elsewhere. Activists, though trained in social analysis and having acquired quite an accurate understanding of the Indian situation, often lack the art of facilitating an analysis made by the people. This art consists in initiating and stimulating reflection among the people on factual data, experience, and action undertaken, which increasingly reveals the objective social reality and the nature of the social organisation of the villages in which they are captives and deprived of a large part of their labour through a

multitude of mechanisms. Though this educational process would be promoted by different action groups in various parts of a region or state, the discoveries made by the people would be rather similar. Similar causes of poverty and exploitation would become transparent, and a similar 'picture' of the nature of society would emerge. A real political education of the people would take place with great inherent power to unite them in action and struggle for justice.

If, instead of this, the social analysis is mainly done by the activists and expresses little the real experience acquired by the people subsisting within this oppressive reality, then it is likely to remain very subjective and inadequate. This also can explain to a considerable extent the wide divergence in the perception of this reality among activists of various groups. What really keeps them apart is, in fact, the shared inability to learn from the people. This again indicates the practice of a methodology which does not give importance to the process of collective discovery of social reality. The very idea of conscientising others contains a contradiction and illegitimately assumes to possess the life experience of the others.

When the MOTT team published, *Learning From The Rural Poor*, (Volken et al. 1982) the selection of the book's title was to indicate a real experience. This experience got very much enriched during the time subsequent to this publication. Today, we are more amazed at the eminent role illiterate peasants can play in arriving at an analysis of social reality which has the inherent power to transform this, and even more intensely to transform all who participate in it. The effectiveness of this conscientising process is decisively determined by the richness of the experience of the people and the quality of the interaction between the participants. As such reflection always takes place in view of action, strategy planning is inherent to this exercise, and it is in this that the capacity of the people to think in a very realistic way is most revealed.

The difficulties of action groups to forge unity among themselves is heightened by different views prevailing among action groups with regard to political parties. Though most groups came into existence because they were disillusioned with existing political parties, experience in the field has indicated the need for strong support from the macro-level. For this, there are two

alternatives: political parties on the one hand, and institutions and organisations with a national standing. The first choice, made by a few groups, has in several instances led to the experience that here too 'big fish want to swallow small fish.' The leftist parties do claim that they alone can provide leadership to activists and movements having a radical orientation. This claim does find acceptance by a few, but the majority are apprehensive about the consequences of such linkages with leftist parties. They find their fears confirmed in what they read about the chain of conflcts between the C.P.M. and the *Kashtakari Sangathana* in the Thane District, and in what they observe in their own region.

Among the more politically conscious groups, the belief in non-party political formations prevails. With this prespective, they seek support rather from non-party institutions and organisations which have demonstrated the capacity to provide it. In some regions, common platforms for regular meetings have been created with such support. In this way for instance, a linkage was established between the action groups in Orissa. In other places as in Timilnadu, this is not easily achieved, partly because of the great number and variety of groups, and partly because of the multiplicity of 'patrons' who appear on the scene intent on co-ordinating action groups.

Trapped in structures created

The development and expansion of the activities of a group which has easy access to outside financial aid affects not only the type of residence and physical base, but also the nature of the 'movement.' The intention was that the organisation centred on the core team will gradually wither away and give growing importance to an organisation of the people. The inner logic of the direction taken, however, works against this devolution. In order to extend 'the arm of the core team,' local animators are selected from among the somewhat educated youth. After some training, each one is put in charge of some village units. They remain closely associated with the core group and are accountable to its leader or members. Gradually, a structure evolves that is marked by social differentiation and tends to grow into a hierarchical system. If the leader of the group has a charismatic or otherwise strong personality, this process gets accelerated.

Here again, available funds come into play. This is all the more noticeable when the leader alone administers the funds, and is accountable for it only to the donor agency. If, apart from the other group members, the local animators, and possibly in addition, health workers, adult educators and skilled teachers are receiving remuneration from the team leader, an umber of negative consequences set in. The 'employer image' comes up, and inter-personal relations get affected by it. The fact that some of the local workers who have performed well are taken into the team, only complicates matters. The group that was to prevent individualist seeking for social promotion among the people, finds this manifested within its own ranks. This and the tilting of power towards the centre, as well as the need to exercise authority in order to maintain discipline among the full-timers, create circumstances that are not at all favourable for the development of a real people's movement. A hierarchy has developed within the inner circle in which the local members occupy the lowest place in terms of responsibility, freedom, and remuneration. This disqualifies it from being the change agent for the promoting of a people's organisation on the basis of real equality.

Such a course of events has been prevented where, despite the weaknesses of the people, the local workers are primarily responsible to them, and have in fact been selected by them. Right from the early beginnings, special efforts have been made not to leave the people at the periphery of decision and policy-making. The most important communication is not from top down, but from the village unit up, where first problems are articulated and requirements for action are expressed. The action group has an important role to play in giving orientation and training to animators and leaders deputed by the people, so that an analytical mentality develops among the people with their assistance. The local leaders are to be the main actors in laying the foundation for a regional organisation, and in exercising organisational capacity. At this crucial stage, resident action groups often seem to succumb to the pressures for playing an excessively directive role. In moments of crisis, and of taking important decisions, it is natural for the locally emerging leadership to rely on the much more educated and 'qualified' core team. It is these, who because of their standing in society, are more effective in making representations at different levels. These and similar expectations

coming from the side of the people, have in many instances led to the development of new, often hidden, dependencies of a people's movement of the action group. Mostly, efficiency is highly valued in the group and trends towards adopting a management appproach to building up a people's organisation are manifested not infrequently at this stage. How can action groups living in the midst of the people save themselves from becoming or remaining the centre of key decision-making? This question is asked from the vantage point of a mobile team, MOTI, to which I belong. In our experience, the mobile character of a team, having its permanent base outside the area of the people's organisation with which it is working, has advantages in developing strategies which maximise the chances of such organisations to gain autonomous strength.

An alternative form of involvement

People grow by exercising responsibility for decision-making and action. In actual practice, the prolonged presence of action groups among the people tends to inhibit this process by subtle mechanisms of control. Many of these are eliminated when a mobile team (not residing in the area of its involvement) is in operation. Such a team's permanent base is distant, and its members move out from there in various regions to take up educational and supportive work among the rural poor and oppressed. Their presence among them is periodic, lasts for three to four years, and each visit is of relatively short duration. Most of the time is spent with leaders that are emerging from among the people. They are selected and deputed by the people and their initial role mainly consists in animating village-unit regular meetings and in helping these units gain organisational strength. They form the core group who play a strategic role in the building up of the people's movement or the regional organisation. In the course of time others join their ranks after they have manifested special ability in organising people and a high degree of commitment to the cause of social liberation. With the others, they form the core group, the *avant-garde* with a higher level of consciousness. This they gain through regular interaction with the mobile visiting team in periodically held orientation-training camps. These have to be of a few days only because the families of these selected

men depend on their wages for a living. Some are themselves bonded labourers, and come to these camps under threat of punishment, and with loss of their hunger wages. They all remain in their environment, and it is there that they begin with the people to reflect on their situation and the causes of their misery. The experience they gain in animating their village units forms the base for the discussion and the analysis, made in training camps and their own monthly meetings. In this, the 'outsiders,' members of the mobile team, have an important role in stimulating analytical thinking, and in helping the participants place facts and events in a socio-economic, political and cultural perspective. The participative style of these camps is by itself an initiation in methods of conducting village unit meetings leading to collective action. The better they come to understand the causes of their poverty and powerlessness, and face growing resistance of the powerful, the more the need for unity and strong organisation becomes obvious to them and the people.

This sums up the substance of MOTT's involvement and experience with the Chattisgarh Krishi Mazdoor Sangh. This movement of landless and bonded labourers grew out of non-existence in a most astounding manner. Within less than three years of MOTT's collaboration with it, it got itself registered as a union and is covering about 150 villages. Its secretary, who with eight years schooling is the most educated among the 4000 members, submitted a writ petition to the Supreme Court, which resulted in its deputing an Inquiry Commission to the area. This investigation into the situation and the incidence of bonded labour in the area, revealed a mosts hocking state of affairs bound to stir up the corridors of the capital. The anger this investigation provoked among the *Maliks* against the 'scoundrel *Harijans* disturbing peace and order' is beyond imagination. A MOTT member was handcuffed and arrested along with a local leader, and taken to court with his hands manacled. The main leaders had to run for safety to another state after they had heard of the plan to 'finish them up.' The people are now anxious to see that Delhi can do something to restore their security, and that the judgement of the Supreme Court will find some implementation. Whatever the outcome, the spirit of the people has grown stronger. The main leaders are even ready to die for the cause of this struggle for justice. Nothing can break the force of the movement, the people believe.

Many local factors, especially the extreme form of exploitation of the people, have favoured the fast growth of CKMS. We are convinced that the mobile mode of MOTT's collaboration left the emerged leaders and the people in a situation in which they had to take their own decisions at every stage and in moments of crisis The three young members of MOTT mainly involved in the area, contributed primarily to the growth of able and committed leadership. These leaders experienced that they can count on the support of MOTT in any event, except decision-making. The mobile mode of operation has proved very favourable in this, and no hidden dependencies of the Sangh on MOTT could develop.

The fact that MOTT members are outsiders, educated and of middle class origin had in no way proved an obstacle in communicating with illiterate landless labourers; neither has it negatively affected the quality of humans relations in this interaction. It may well be that even in this, the characteristic of mobility was helpful. This does suggest to me that the privileged position of action groups in terms of education and social origin need not prevent the development of right attitudes towards the people. Such attitudes make for being accepted by them as true brothers and sisters. I, therefore, believe that the consequence of residing in the area does need further examination.

It has been suggested to me that action groups also have elements of mobility. This is more marked in situations where the movement covers a very large number of villages, which are visited by group members at long intervals. Even in situations of a more limited coverage, the team members move out into surrounding villages. This is true, but does not answer the questions I have raised. I have scrutinised two inter-linked factors which tend to limit the responsibility for decision-making of the people and their organisation. The first was found in the tendency to create a cadre of animators that is primarily responsible to the action group or to its leader. The second is linked to the fact of establishing a centre of residence among the people which puts the action group within easy reach for the leaders, the animators and the people. Struck by the fact that so rarely the prolonged presence of outside groups among the rural poor has resulted in the growth of strong, autonomous and permanent people's organisations, I was led to find in the stable set-up of the group, a factor inhibiting self-reliant decision-making by the people and sound development

of their organisation. From the experience of MOTT, I conclude that it is crucial to face the issue consciously and systematically. To me, this indicates the necessity for action groups to work out a clear strategy that aims at eliminating the negative functions of an established centre of residence and of a local cadre controlled from the centre. All this has to express an attitude of confidence in the capacity of the people, so that animators and leaders are primarily responsible to them; that all decision-making at the village and regional level is exclusively the responsibility of the people and the new leadership. This does not in any way reduce the significance of the contribution action groups have to make. *Theirs, however, is a task of educators and not of managers.* I further believe that activists do expose themselves to excessive stress in an unrealistic attempt of 'total identification' with the rural poor and full integration into a *dalits*' movement. This, in my view, unnecessarily saps the creative energies of the groups which need to be used for meeting ever new challenges of being truly supportive of people's movements for social liberation and social transformation.

The wider context of hope

The upsurge of new life and commitment to the cause of justice among countless educated youth in the country must not lose its momentum and dynamism in the face of apparently insurmountable difficulties and obstructions. With this concern, these lines are written. The future of this committed youth has to be seen in a wider context within which the phenomenon of action groups has arisen. An awakening to the reality of massive pauperisation and systematic violation of human rights, in the midst of growing affluence of a minority, has taken hold of a sizeable section of the educated elite. Belonging to different age-groups, they refuse to be part of and supportive of exploitative structures institutions and societal systems. It is significant that social scientists have increasingly felt the need to associate themselves with action groups. The obvious inadequacy of mere theoretical research has led them to establish links with grassroots reality. That such a collaboration in 'participatory reseach' can generate new knowledge about society, social and political processes, is by now well established.

There are widespread initiatives on the part of scientists to

make scientific knowledge accessible to the masses. The concern for legal education and legal support in favour of the most exploited sections of society is spreading, and is found even in the top judicial institutions. These and many other attempts point to a need of linkages with youth involved among the poor, enabling them to gain organisational strength and political weight. Not all among the youth who have been deeply touched and transformed by an experience of involvement with the poor, can remain on the front-line of social action. They have to join the ranks of others who are 'in the system' but refuse to be 'of the system.' Having fought for economic and political rights in solidarity with the poor, they have to remain supportive of the human rights movement in the country. Their gained authenticity of matching words with deeds cannot get lost without betrayal and reversal of life orientation. With time, one would expect that the dynamics and challenges arising from the depth of present history will be understood with even greater clarity. In any case, there is no path open to retreat into a sort of political neutrality.

This has become all the more impossible in the present moment of history when the masses of the people have awakened to a new consciousness and to new aspirations for a dignified existence. Also manifest are the signs of a new moral consciousness among some of the most educated leading them to make 'costly' options. Youth and action groups in particular have contributed significantly to this awakening process of the seventies. With increasing polarisation between the rich and the poor, with growing corruption and degeneration in circles that should feel most responsible for the realisation of the dream of the Founding Fathers of the nation, the historic challenges of this decade can only increase. The fact that in the past a section of educated youth had most courageously responded to the situation perceived, and the fact that some of the professional elite is reacting responsibly to the absurdity of the dominant current, gives ground to believe that if not action groups by themselves, the movement for a new and just social order is not the end but the beginning of a dream.

3

The Role of Women in Social Change and People's Movements

Sujata Gothoskar
Vijay Kanhere

With the birth of the women's movement in the 1970s, the problem of social change began to be viewed in an entirely different context. Till then the workers, the intellectuals, the rural poor, the *dalits* and other oppressed minorities were considered the bulwark of any change. Women who formed more than half of this population were all but ignored. When one talked of the exploited sections, one could only think of the male members of these groups and classes.

One of the most articulate conceptions of social change is that put forward by the Socialists and the Communists—not merely by those belonging to the established parties, but individuals, groups, movements, with explicit or implicit Socialist or Communist leanings. In Communist literature and practice, the concept of social change or revolution is centred round capturing state power. In this conception, only the 'advanced' sections of the proletariat, the workers in the crucial industries and key sectors, are important for the revolution. This invariably, and more so in the Indian context, means the male workers. The working class movement in this conception, is in effect the male workers' movement. This partially explains the relative uninvolvement of women in these movements on the one hand, and the lip service of the traditional Communists to the women's movement, on the other.

The women's movement which began to take shape in the 1970s in India and developed into a vocal and articulate movement in the 1980s, has challenged this concept and has in fact deepened the understanding of social change as *a radical change in all the social relations*. This perspective takes into account and builds on the daily struggles of the oppressed—children, women and men. What is crucial to this process of social change is the entire attempt by the oppressed sections to change the entire relationship of exploitation, oppression, domination and authority. It views struggle against capitalist exploitation and authority, against the oppression of one caste by another and of one sex by another as equally important. It sees social change *not* as a cataclysmic event but as a slow and sure process given the very day-to-day practical struggles of the oppressed.

This conception of social change relates to a broader definition of the 'establishment.' The anti-establishment struggle is not only against capitalist exploitation, but also against any structures and values that uphold the 'superiority by birth' by virtue of one's class, caste or sex against all structures and values that justify and reinforce exploitation and oppression of one group or individual by another. Hence patriarchy and ideas of male supremacy and superiority are as much a part of the establishment as capitalist/landlord exploitation. It is this all-encompassing aspect of the establishment that the women's movement is up against. Hence the women's movement is in itself a valid, independent people's movement, also simply because women are people.

The women's movement

The aim of the women's movement is nothing short of a total change in the hierarchical relations between men, women and children. This is no small or short-term goal and it encompasses all aspects of the lives of people—their work, their beliefs, cultural traditions, family relations, their roles in the economic and social spheres, etc. If women and men have to be equal they have to feel themselves equal. In a situation where women and children are constantly oppressed and subjugated, certain structures and supports are necessary for women where they collectively and individually feel that they are equal, that they can establish their equality and struggle for it.

In some parts of the world, groups of women have chosen to live their lives separately from men, not to interact with men or relate with them at all. These small groups live with women, work with women, go to women's book stores, women's clubs, women's stores, libraries etc. They can do so because they can afford to. Their material condition enables them to live such a life. Even then, they face many hurdles and have many problems as they live in a world dominated by men. And such women's groups are a minuscule minority even in western countries.

The vast majority have to and do live in a society of men, women and children. And the women's movement is as much about these millions of women, who are struggling to live an equal, human life. Their aim is to struggle for and establish sexual equality and for this they have to, as a group and as individuals, change the values and structures that treat women as inferior. Thus the women's movement as a whole cannot be separatist.

Though the movement has to include men in the process of change, it does stress the need for autonomy, and rightly so. Until today women have not had the opportunity to really come together to share their experiences of being women, of being an oppressed sex in a male-defined society and of struggling against it. There are various reasons for their not being able to come together as people having common interests.

Unlike other oppressed sections like workers, women do not come together under a single roof for work, but are divided in their own homes even when they work, as their main duty is housework. Hence they do not have organisations like trade unions to voice their grievances and demands. And even when women workers belong to trade unions, they are there as workers and are rarely able to voice their grievances and the problems they face as women.

The incident in one of the well-known pharmaceutical factories in Bombay, employing about 750 workers, out of whom 250 are women, is an eye-opener in this respect. A woman worker was sexually harassed by a male worker. When she could no longer tolerate it, she lodged a police complaint. The evidence against the man was overwhelming. Ultimately, the management suspended the male worker. The trade union, without inquiring into the entire incident, decided to support the man and both male and female workers went on a four-week strike demanding that the

suspension be revoked or that the woman who was harassed also be suspended. The men and women workers were ready to lose their wages for the simple reason that the male worker was a union member and the woman was not. The woman who was harassed and the other women workers could not come together as women and go into the incident thoroughly.

On the other hand, in other class-based movements where women have had an opportunity to come together as women, the women's movement, as well as the class movement have been able to acquire new dimensions and go ahead on their own as well as together. For example, in Shahada in northern Maharashtra, the women from *Shramik Sanghatana* got together in women's camps (*shibirs*) and began to tackle the question of wife-beating and alcoholism. They began to participate in women's struggles as well as in the *Shramik Sanghatana* with a great deal of enthusiasm and understanding. Of course the situation in Bombay and Shahada are completely different and so are the possibilities for different types of movements. The point of these examples, however, is to indicate the principle we have tried to establish.

Unlike other oppressed minorities or *dalits*, women do not have a community of their own, either location-wise or as a psychological-emotional bond. In fact women are separated from one another by the mode in which they live i.e., in the family and the four walls of the house. This is not to say that women have no relationship with one another. Neighbourhoods do provide them with some emotional support. However, these supports are not stable and are wrought with internal contradictions. Fights over the filling of water or similar tensions exist to constantly erode the support that women usually have. Besides, these supports are not sufficient for women to come together against drunken or battering husbands or harassing in-laws. These supports have to be backed by a conscious attitude, born out of experience, of a commoness of problems and struggles This requires the gradual easing out of the internal tensions between women and seeing themselves as valid human beings entitled to decent human treatment. This takes time and the process is a long and painful one. Hence the stress on autonomy, so that women have time and space to grapple with their own selves before additional dimensions and the consequent complications are introduced within the movement.

Different aspects of oppression and the women's movement

The women's movement is conscious of the contradictions that exist within women themselves. They belong to different classes, castes, religions, etc. The domestic worker women and those who employ them have different and contradictory interests in their mutual relations. Women's movement recognises this and would support an organisation of domestics quite separate from an organisation where they come together with their women employers, since it stresses the need for both types of organisations—those in which the working women organise themselves separately for higher wages, shorter working hours, better treatment, etc., and the one in which they come together as women. The common organisation is based on the fact that both of them are women, that they are both likely to be raped, beaten up, harassed by their husband or in-laws, tortured by them or sexually exploited by other men. In cities like Pune, for example, there is the *Molkarin Sanghatana*—an organisation of domestic women workers, and there are groups like the *Stree Mukti Sampark Samiti* and magazines like *Baija*, which take up the issues of women as such.

The point about the 'multi-class nature' of the women's movement has been stressed often enough by people who want to discredit the movement. 'How can such different types of women have anything in common?' is the common question. We have just mentioned issues that have no solution other than through a women's movement—issues ranging from rape and wife-beating and murder to the early socialisation of the child to accept discrimination and inferiority. The point, however, is slightly different. Those people who have these objections of 'the multi-class nature' of women's movement, have a different story to tell when it comes to the workers' movement of the national movements. Bank employees organise in trade unions, so do sweepers and domestic servants who work for the employees. In various activities organised by the unions or political parties, both of them are together. From our point of view, this is inevitable and a positive step forward. But what about the cries of the 'multi-class nature' of the movement? Or are these cries specially reserved for women?

The necessity to organise separately even within the broader movement has been felt in other organisations too like the trade

union, toilers' movement, *dalit* movement and other minorities' movements and those of the culturally oppressed section. The *dalit* women are women, *dalits* and labourers. Their existence is complex so are their lives, their problems and hence their struggles. It would be totally incorrect to pose them as alternatives but only as complementing and supplementing each other. There are bound to be contradictions between these organisations in the short run. But that is the processs of struggle and cannot be given as rationale for the invalidity of the movement of women or of any other group for that matter.

In instances where a *dalit* woman, for example, is raped by an upper class and upper caste male, all the factors operate together The woman is a woman, is a *dalit*, is a labourer. The rapist is a man, is an upper caste and upper class male. In situations like this, the women's movement, the *dalit* movement and the labourers' movement have similar interests, though they may emphasise different aspects, as it happened during the 1978 caste riots in rural Maharashtra.

For such atrocities to stop, all three types of movements are necessary, and any single movement cannot effectively put an end to this. Yet the women's movement has a qualitatively different role to play. The act through which the *dalit* woman is oppressed i.e., raped, is not the act through which any *dalit* man would be oppressed. It is rape. The men opposed to rape may oppose it because 'their women' are defiled, as has happened in many instances of rapes during riots and wars. The women's movement, on the other hand, would oppose it as an attack on the individuality of the woman through the age-old weapon that men use to keep all women in terror.

The role of the women's movement comes much more into evidence, when women are raped or beaten up or murdered by men of the same class the women belong to. If, for example, a woman from a minority community is harassed by a man from her own community, or if an upper class woman is harassed by a man from the dominant sections, the only non-vacilating supporter of the women has been the women's movement. This is so because *any rape* perpetuates terror for *all women*. Besides, men from the oppressed sections cannot liberate themselves by oppressing women. There are, for example, cases of landlords raping the wives of the male workers who demanded their rights

to form their own organisations or higher wages etc. The landlords and their *goondas* raped the wives of the workers in order to punish the men by showing the power of the landlords over women whom both the workers and the landlords considered the male workers' property.

Women's movement and other movement for social change

Thus the specificity of the women's movement is that it operates within each of these movements and hence is a 'correctional movement' within each of them. 'Correctional,' because, when within these movements against oppression, a hierarchy is created (which is inevitable) especially between men and women, the women's movement points out how this hierarchy is against the interests of that whole movement and not merely against women.

Within the women's movement itself there are various type of organisations based on specific issues. Bombay, for example, has organisations like *Nari Sangharsh Samiti*, *Puragami Mahila Sanghatana*, *Stree Jagruti Samiti* and several smaller groups including a few party related ones, dealing with issues around women and work. Some of these like *Stree Jagruti* also work among slum women. *Nari Sangharsh Samiti* has worked among nurses, unorganised women workers and prostitutes, their perspective being to work among unorganised sections of women and attempt to organise them around issues affecting only women, as for example, sexual harassment on the work site, etc. The Women's Centre attempts to reach out to women who are victims of oppression in the family. The first and the largest such organisation was the Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay. Similar organisations have been formed in other parts of the country, particularly in the cities.

These organisations feed into each other as to their objectives. The autonomous women's organisations, like the Forum, aim at the building up of the self-confidence of women, individually and collectively. As one of the activists of the Forum put it, 'Our self-confidence and self-image, depends very crucially on the degree to which we control our bodies, our lives.' Rape, for example, can totally undermine it, likewise unwanted pregnancies, beatings, psychological torture etc. It is not simply physical experience but the loss of control over her own body that reinforces

her image of herself as helpless, vulnerable, incapable of self-determination. It would be inconceivable for a woman with such a self-image to struggle in order to determine other aspects of her life. Thus the issues taken up by the women's movement are, in this sense, crucial to any form of women's struggle.

Women's organisations and the working class movement of the oppressed

When women join other organisations of the oppressed, they struggle together with men, interact with them and take up issues that are common to all members of their class, irrespective of their sex. The tensions between men and women are not addressed in these organisations. Similarly, in a society where culturally men dominate over women, organisations that take up issues common to both are likely to undermine those that relate more specifically to women even within the framework of that organisation. As already mentioned, trade unions are known to deemphasise issues relating to women even at work such as discrimination in recruitment, promotions, sexual harassment at work and so on. Though less well known, similar is the experience of women in other general movements and organisations.

What are the implications of this for the working class movement? The working class including men, women and children, is struggling against the exploitation and oppression by capital in the factory, on the streets. . . . In the process of its revolutionary struggle, it does and has to question every form of oppression it faces, including that in the family. In fact, if oppression in one area of life is taken for granted, not struggled against, there is even less likelihood and enthusiasm to challenge it in another. Similarly for male workers, if they assume their superiority or supremacy over their women and children, it is a short step to assume superiority as a principle. Why not then between one class and another? It is difficult, however, to easily renounce the vested interest one has in the domination over another because if this superiority and the consequent sexual division or labour are challenged, then most male activists cannot expect a well-kept home and hot meals after their daily late nights out. But Communists and Feminists have to be against all vested interests, especially these that divide the working class movement into

dominating men and oppressed women. Hence, for the working class movement to be meaningful to all, it is important for the trade unions to take a stand.

The women's movement does not divide the working class movement. The working class movement is already divided. The women's movement in fact works towards a healthier unity of the working class movement because *unity cannot be forged by suppressing the suppressed*. That would be only a formal and hence a false unity since real unity is necessarily of and between equals. Rape, wife-beating, dowry, etc., are means by which all women including working class women are kept subjugated, unequal, terrorised.

The working class movement aims at freedom, autonomy to produce according to the needs of the workers, to create a world free from the values that crush it, to fashion a society that gives free expression to human creativity. The first step toward this is control over oneself, one's own body. Only then control over production and society make sense. This requires that women organise themsevles and create a forum to express themselves, their grievances and demands. This aim in no way contradicts those of the working class movement, unless it is defined as male workers' movement.

This perspective is true in the long, middle and short run. But contradictions are bound to come up in specific instances, as mentioned earlier. These are due to the vested interests of men, including those who participate in movements for social change. Vested interests are difficult to identify and admit on one's own and those that are handed down from ages and have social sanction, like the subordination of women, are harder to give up, especially because these have day-to-day advantages for men. Yet, women are a part of the clientele of these movements and organisations, part of the people who participate in struggles and movements for social change. So they too have to be taken into account.

Some prevalent attitudes

The attitudes that keep women in a subordinate position even in a working class movement can be seen in some statements of activists:

> In demonstrations and militant action, women should be in the front, so that police do not attack us easily. Women also create problems for the police; women police are few in numbers and hence arrests become a tedious job for the police; the press looks at attacks on women in a different light than attacks on men workers.

Through the ages, men have said 'a woman's place is in the home' and have dictated to women their role in the family and their place in society. The above activist is doing just this by extending this basic attitude to women's place in the movement. This presumes that women cannot define their place themselves (or is it too dangerous to let them do it?) This activist defines it for the women—they are to be instruments for achieving goals that are assigned to them and are supposedly superior to what the women themselves want to achieve.

Another well-intentioned friend of ours said:

> It is important to involve women in our struggle for another reason too. Otherwise they are a drag on the movement; all of us know how many activists had to withdraw because their wives pulled them back by constant nagging. Women are confined to their narrow world so their outlook remains narrow and shortsighted. They act as strike-breakers.

And how many women who were active in the movement before their marriage, have had to withdraw and could never participate? Many women who were active in the national independence struggle and the Communist movement had to take up jobs and/or stay behind to look after their homes and children as their husbands devoted themselves to full-time political work. One rarely asks who made these decisions and the criteria used. Besides, since the very inception of the trade union movement, there have been instances when women workers have fought for their trade union rights and male workers have opposed them sometimes by acting as strike-breakers.

> Women and men are like the two wheels of a cart and so men and women should go ahead together. If one wheel stops, the cart cannot go ahead. So we should see that women participate. Also if one wheel suddenly goes against the other, the cart will skid. If women fight against men, won't our family, our society and our movement break down?

Here, the male activist assumes that the two wheels are equal and that without any reason, women are fighting men and are

destabilising 'the cart.' The point, however, is that today 'the cart' is already destabilised and staggering, because the two wheels are unequal. What should be said in the least is that if men continue to oppress women and if women do not fight back, then the entire class movement will be paralysed and half of its potential energy will not blossom forth

Secondly, this activist is bothered about the break-up of the family, our society and our movement. He assumes that the family, society and our movement, as they exist today, are ideal and are not based on the oppression of at least half their members. In fact, they need total overhauling if they have to exist in a healthy state.

> In today's capitalist society, there are so many problems. But we must concentrate our energies on the basic issue first; basic in two senses—those that relate to the base of this system and are fundamental and urgent. This issue is the class issue. With the class issues, we should support women's cause as well because we don't want women to be slaves. But every problem needs a proper situation to be dealt with. Today we concentrate on wage issues, on the issue of atrocities, on protecting our women from rapes of the landlords. Family matters will take a long time to resolve. Only in a classless society can we solve these problems.

This is a typical example of the linear, mechanical and non-dialectical way of looking at the dynamics of change. The assumption is that the wage issue gets solved and then the women's issue begins its resolution. This assumption completely overlooks the interlinkages between various movements. Even for the abolition of wage slavery, the unity of all the toilers is a necessity. That unity, an integrated class movement, is not possible unless the various sections of toilers—women, *dalits* and others—come together in a non-oppressive unity. This plea for the postponement of the women's movement is on the other hand opportunist. It is a desperate attempt to preserve the oppression of women by men under the garb of protecting the interests of 'the movement.' This opportunism does take the form of more and more various attacks like the following one:

> It is only bourgeois women and their organisations that shout about the issue of wife-beating, because these upper class women have never known what it is to be hungry. They know nothing about the proletarian family. The basic problem is

> economic. If we begin a movement against wifebeating we will be playing in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Men workers will go against us and the principle problem will remain unresolved. That is why we are against the atrocities on women, against the rapes by the police and landlords on our women, or even dowry deaths. But one should not criticise activists for remaining within certain limits because that is the best course not only for the class movement or the left movement, but also for the women's movement in the long run.

This is a bit too much. Let us however go into it. Here again this activist assumes that women cannot rationally define the limits of today's activity. He chooses to forget that he and many others are prepared to consider rape, wife-murder etc., as issues only because the women's movement has raised its voice against these. His basic assumption is that women are irrational. He wants to harp on this in his back-door fashion, by bringing the class origins of the activists in the women's movement. He overlooks the fact that there is one 'rationality' for men as oppressors and another rationality for women as oppressed. When these two 'rationalities' clash, the issue gets decided by whoever is more powerful. Until recently, women have usually been at the receiving end because of their position in the power structure in the family and in the society at large. No sooner has the process of their empowerment begins, every possible argument seems to be hurled at them.

As for class origins, which movement, at its inception, was not represented by upper class individuals and sections? The left movement? The working class movement? The *dalit* movement?

Besides, this activist is factually incorrect. It is not only 'bourgeois' women who are struggling against their own oppression. The tribal women, slum women, working women, women commuters are struggling individually *and* collectively against the forms of oppression they face.

He insists that bourgeois women do not know what hunger is. Do the tribal women, slum women know it? All women, including 'bourgeois women know the experience of torture for dowry, starvation with children when locked out, humiliation due to rape and molestation, and the physical and mental trauma a battering husband inflicts. What many women experience is starvation and rape, starvation and wife-beating, starvation and

humiliation . . . What our activist may have at the most experienced is beating his own wife or shutting his eyes and ears to the cries of a battered wife in the neighbourhood with a smug smile on his face, thinking 'Oh, only bourgeois women are bothered about such things!'

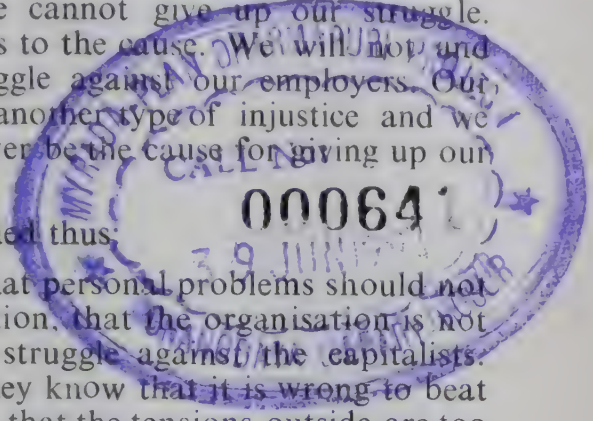
Slow change in attitudes

Most of us have experiened these attitudes in the course of our participation in these movements. We have also been noticing a slow change both among men and women. For example, when a male activist accused the workers of the women's movement of being of the upper class, one of our friends, a woman activist, retorted 'when we women talk about people's movements, the left movement, we are revolutionary women, leftist woman, progressive women. But the moment we start talking about women's movement, we are immediately branded as upper class women'.

This change of attitudes has come about mainly because women workers—tribal, slum and middle class women—are becoming more and more aware of their multiple oppression, especially in their homes, in their own organisations and their society at large. Militant women's organisations have been formed by tribal labouring women in Dhulia, Thana, Bihar as well as in other parts of the country. Whether it is the *beedi* workers at Nipani or the maid servants in some districts of Maharashtra or nurses in Bombay women have formed organisations exclusively for themselves. This very experience in organsising themselves gives them greater self-confidence which goes beyond the traditional divide of trade union versus women's issues. This change in the attitudes of the hitherto male organisations is reflected in the organisational structure and some decisions of these organisations. It may be too early to perceive a radical change but it is discernible in some public speeches of a few male activists. As an example we may mention an activist from a rural labourers' organisation who stated

> Women are struggling and are going to struggle against their own oppression—against wife-beating, against sexual division of labour. . . . Our union is against injustice and we support any struggle against oppression and against our employers. And never forget that it is a great cause. If any one of our

> comrades starts complaining that women are going beyond their limits and that he does not want to be part of our union, he should be told in unambiguous terms that he is in fact deserting our great cause. If we are going to be swayed because women are not allowing us to do something that we should not do anyway, we cannot give up our struggle. Otherwise we will be traitors to the cause. We will not and shall not give up our struggle against our employers. Our women are fighting against another type of injustice and we support them. That can never be the cause for giving up our fight.



Another urban left activist argued thus:

> Some of us here have said that personal problems should not be discussed in the organisation, that the organisation is not for these things, but for our struggle against the capitalists. They have also said that they know that it is wrong to beat their wives and children but that the tensions outside are too many to bear and that wives refuse to understand this, that they do heavy work the whole day but get very low wages and cannot afford to give all that their families ask for, but that their wives do not understand this. It is high time we understood a few things that we have ignored up to now. What do we do when we beat our wives or harass women? The anger against our employers, against our real enemies is directed against women who have nothing to do with our problems, who have not created them. . . . And who escapes? The very system, the very employer who has made life difficult for us. As long as such outlets are available, men are going to use them and the ruling class is going to exploit that anger against women for their own purpose. Today we are allowing ourselves to be made use of because we do not want to give up our *dadagiri* over our wives. Our wives are used as live gutters to drain away the dirt that we have no courage to clean on our own. These gutters are used to reproduce a humble worker every morning The bosses are happy. They can rely on his home and his family to provide an outlet for the frustration at work. A deprivation of this outlet, due to the resistance of women, will force men to rise against the capitalists. . . .

Male rationale for women's movement

It is clear from these statements that some traditional attitudes are changing as a result of pressure from women's organisations. However, one should add that the basic attitudes still remain disturbing. The last statement, for example, does reflect a positive change. Yet it is constricted by its male-centred attitude and

hence is inadequate. This attitude looks at the women's movement only as a contributory factor, nay, as a mere means for the males in other movements to continue their present struggle despite women. It is positive only to the extent that it recognises the necessity of the women's movement; it however refuses to consider the liberation of half the humanity as positive on its own grounds. Women fighting against their own oppression do not need any extraneous criterion or argument for their support.

Secondly, it points to an important aspects of women's role in the family, that women not only reproduce labour-power in the cheapest possible way, but also emotionally and sexually satisfy workers, often at the expense of their own needs. Because of the subordination of women, men vent their anger and frustration on women. This too is a 'task' they perform at home and in society in general. The important element missed out in this explanation is that men most often *do not need any reason whatsoever*, whether it be frustration at work or low salary to harass or humiliate women. Often it is *only because she is a woman and he a man that the most grotesque atrocities are committed*, whether it is rape, sexual sadism, beatings, molestation or murder. When, for example, so many women are burnt to death in all parts of India today, what other explanation can one give other than to say that *women are considered an easily expendable and disposable commodity*. That is what all of us are socialised into, brought up on. That is an important element of patriarchy.

These ideas and relations are reproduced and perpetuated daily in the family, in the work-place, on the streets, in organisations. They cannot be touched, leave alone challenged, by paying lip service to the issues the women's movement has raised. Patriarchy and women's oppression is age-old and is too deeply entrenched within us to be dealt with casually. It is there in the smallest of gestures and words. It has to be challenged with all might. The most important attack has to be on our own selves and in terms of our own ideas and secret thoughts on the one hand, and our actions and behaviour on the other. Secondly, the organisations that one participates in for working towards social change have to constantly evaluate their own practice in this light. The slogan 'personal is political' is about a decade old but still retains its significance and freshness. No movement for social change can legitimately accept the divide that exists in our society

at large between the 'social' and 'personal' self. In today's society, an individual can be both, a respectable industrialist and a brutal father or husband or a rapist. The women's movement does not accept this divide. It looks at change as a process, but not as a divide. The process for social change primarily includes the changers themselves. The women's movement has emphasised this aspect and given it a framework—its struggle against patriarchal oppression.

We would once again emphasise that apart from deepening the conception of social change, the women's movement has a validity of its own. It is a movement in its own right and its aim is nothing short of total change in the relations of hierarchy, authority, domination between women, men and children. Today if someone poses the problem, 'do women have any role in the process of social change?' we will have to conclude that the questioner is waking up after decades of sleep. However, if anyone were to seriously ask how women as women are in practice contributing to the movement for social change, one would not have an easy answer. This paper is a modest attempt in this direction.

4

External Support for Action Groups: The Role of Macro-Organisations

Walter Fernandes

Discussion on voluntary action has today gone beyond relief and health care in which the non-governmental sector is prominent. Very few would today restrict discussion mostly to legal aspects such as the need of amending the Registration of Societies Act (e.g. Kulkarni 1983), unless perhaps one views the sector as a threat to the present dominant sections of society and propagates greater control over the voluntary organisations. Today discussion is primarily on action groups whom some consider a threat while others view them as harbingers of a new society, because of their attempt to tilt the balance of power in favour of the marginalised sections of society. Analysts describe this shift in terms of empowering the powerless (Volken, Kumar and Kaithathara 1982) through people's participation in their own development (Mehta 1983), as the marginalised taking control over their lives and decision-making (Mehta 1983) or as a non-party political process (Kothari 1983). While some analyse their achievement in organising the rural poor, others have criticised them for their 'myth' of service and flexibility and the 'reality' of power and institutionalisation, for the role played in their life by coordinating agencies, many of them self-apparented, and by

foreign aid (Kulkarni 1983). However, most critics seem to view only the destabilising role played by the action groups without always situating them within the context of the objective situation at a given historical moment that facilitated and even necessitated the birth of these organisations. This paper will therefore attempt to discuss most of these issues within their historical context but will concentrate primarily on the role of macro-agencies, i.e., researches and institutions who can play supportive role to the action groups.

The action groups

While there is difference of opinion on the role and the strategy of action groups, it is commonly agreed that they are the result of the disillusionment of the middle class youth in the 1960s and 70s with the development model, the role of the political parties, particularly those of the left, and with voluntary agencies. They are the result of a historical process through which the youth as well as the voluntary agencies whose cadre they formed, passed through in these years of political and economic crisis. At the political level disillusionment set in as a result of the attitude of the leftist parties in the manipulations of the ruling alliance in the 1960s and the 1970s particularly in the decade of 1969-1979. The disillusionment with the voluntary agencies was a result of the realisation that the capital-intensive sophisticated technology and heavy industry-based approach of the country's planned development that was expected to solve the socio-economic problems of the country had in practice led to unemployment and greater impoverishment of the weaker sections.

The result of this disillusionment was bound to be felt by the voluntary agencies that had taken the technology-based economic growth model for granted. A consequence of the situation was that some of these agencies began to move away from their earlier orientation to greater involvement in people's organisation. They had already passed through a historical process that had taken them from their early relief orientation of satisfying immediate needs of the people, to institutionalised care of the hospitals and schools, and a realisation that families with a weak economic base were unable to get the benefits of the institutions and that relief could not solve their problems (Arora 1979:

27-35). A result of this understanding was the growth of projects focused on productivity-oriented technology and on functional literacy-oriented extension work.

> However, by the 1970s many voluntary organisations began to feel that economic input alone could not overcome poverty which, they felt, was the result of the oppressive social structures. Their experience as well as other developments in the country convinced them that the dominant sections tended to get most of the benefits of the economic growth-oriented technical and other organisational inputs. A new type of education, geared to making the weakest sections aware of their situation in order to help them become active agents of their own development and change in their society was considered essential (Fernandes 1981: 36).

This type of development projects were often referred to as 'mass action for development'. As Dunu Roy says (1983: 61-62):

> From the notion of mass action *for* development it is but a short step logically to mass action *against* those who have so far been monopolising the fruits of development. Thus notions of organisation and mobilisation emerge to supplant the earlier view of village self-reliance through khadi and village industries. . . . In a class society, and under the tutelage of the counter ideology, individuals will begin to see the class antagonisms when mere mobilisation fails to develop the forces of production, and from that to an understanding of politics is another short logical step. . . . Thus, through the agency of the counter ideology, conceptions develop from *charity* to *development* from developmet to *organisation*, from *organisation* to *politics* and from *politics* to *political education*.

The result of this process is that a little over 50 per cent of the groups that have been listed in directories have remained in what is called development and the others have moved into new fields and several of them have become action groups (ibid: 78-79). It is the action groups, more than any other agency, that are caught in the dilemmas concerning macro-support relations with political parties, the interaction between people's participation and institutionalisation, internal conflicts and the consequent problem of organising the people. As a result, these are the organisations that need support from the macro-organisations, not coordination from self-appointed coordinating bodies as Kulkarni, rightly points out, but the type of support that can help them get over these constraints and facilitate their growth.

Class difference

Many of these conflicts and constraints seem to be intrinsic to the nature of the action groups themselves. Rajni Kothari (1983: 19-20) mentions that the first feature of these groups is that the activists are catering to the sectors such as landless agricultural labourers that are deprived of their share in development and are neglected by other macro-organisations such as political parties. On the other hand, the activists getting involved in their organisation through the action groups belong to the middle classes. This causes the first constraint. Because of the difference of class between the people and the activists, many ideals that the activists stand for may not be put into practice. This concerns in particular the building up of people's organisations. The activists may easily forget that they are outsiders who are not to be permanent doers but are to be catalytic agents in order to create animators in the communities. In other words, they cannot forget that the

> movement will really be launched when the role of animation is from within the local community. Hence theirs is a transitory, catalytic role and their primary responsibility is the identification and formation of local animators (Fernandes 1980: 180).

Their class difference and the well known dependence and low self-image of the oppressed sections can lead to a non-participative process. Paulo Freire (1972: 24-25) indicates it when he speaks of the oppressed suffering from the duality of an authentic existence and bondage, i.e. the conflict of 'the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided, between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting him, between human solidarity and alienation.' Heredero (1977: 24-25) describes this duality as a low self-image of themselves and of their group which the oppressed have internalised because of centuries of imposition of the oppressor's values on them.

Given this low self-image and internalisation of the oppressor's values which the dominant cultures impose on the dependent groups in order to maintain the system of oppression (Kulke 1983: 40-41), the oppressed can easily transfer this dependence to the activists whom they view no more as oppressors but as benefactors. The activists in their turn, are persons belonging to the middle classes and as such may be inclined to look for quick results. In

77

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the process they may easily tend to throw overboard many ideals they stand for, particularly the organisation of the people and their total participation (Sethi 1983: 115-117). The activists may tend to take many decisions for the people and this inhibits the growth of people's organisations.

That is where the first role of support organisations, particularly of researchers, comes in. Their work is to get involved with the activists and facilitate an ongoing process of reflection on their social reality and their role in it, without in any way using them as objects of study as traditional researchers tend to do. The researcher needs to get involved in the work of the people not as the bearer of knowledge but as a participant who has a theoretical grasp of the situation and at the same time comes as a learner and sharer in the situation of the oppressed (Tandon 1981: 33). Theirs it is to facilitate in the action groups an ongoing reflection on the implications of an approach that does not fully involve the people. The factors working against the organisation of the oppressed are many. Apart from the low self-image already mentioned, there are strong caste and group feelings and sectional interests. Besides, the powerful have a hold over the entire village and they ensure that the weaker sections do not come together. Moreover, resistance to organisational efforts often comes from groups that have themselves participated in earlier struggles, have got their benefits and are afraid of anyone below them making demands which may deprive them of their newly acquired benefits. The farmers' movements are an example (Volken, Kumar and Kaithathara 1982: 8). The non-participative approach of the activists can only add to the obstacles of the people's growth and it is the external researchers' and support institutions' duty to enable a process of ongoing self-evaluation that can overcome these obstacles.

Local action and macro-perspective

The second feature of the action groups is that they are involved in local action as against the political parties and other macro-organisations that are involved in action at a broader level. There are groups that have a stronger theoretical perspective than many others. The Programme for Community Organisation, Trivandrum, for example, already in its objectives states that

> the structural change we envisage is change at the macro-level. Such macro-changes have never taken place voluntarily in society. They have been brought about by the consciousness of the oppressed masses through the class struggle. Such a process involves organisation of a base with a macro-perspective. As such, therefore, there cannot be a contradiction between the micro-level of praxis for various reasons (Nayak 1983:67).

However, very few activists can combine local action with a macro-perspective, particularly since many of them are persons who have had a university education, have been disillusioned with the present system of education and often take an anti-intellectual and in a few cases even an anti-theory stance in life. Moreover, the work at the local level takes all their time and they do not have much time for analysis. One should add that most of them are not equipped for macro-analysis. Briefly, one notices in many of them, radicalism without a historical perspective which can motivate the activists in their short-term commitment and to some extent, in their micro-involvement, but may not be of much help beyond individual local action.

As a result many are at a loss as to what step to take next once they are successful in a struggle which is not only geographically local but often remains ideologically localised. Besides, the present writer's experience with many action groups indicates that at somes tage the activists begin to think also of their own security. Young men and women who get involved in action groups immediately after getting a university degree have to think of their future security a few years later. A few of them find ways of withdrawing from direct action in the field but take up jobs that can still support activists from outside. Some others withdraw from people's organisation, make peace with their conscience and join the Establishment. Several remain in the field and try to find security in the action group itself. In most cases this continuation in the action groups tends to become counterproductive because the need of security in life can easily lead the activists to ensure their indispensability in the area and not let people's organisations grow. The oppressed remain dependent on the activists. In other words, they keep a micro-perspective but do not let the people take over the leadership even at the local level.

One should add, however, that while discussing people's organisation, it is important to avoid pitfalls of dichotomies. One

such pitfall can be a confusion between a process of creation of leadership and an incorrect understanding of dependency that leads to premature withdrawal before the people are ready. There is a subtle difference between creating dependency and providing leadership. The question to be asked is not whether one is getting ready to withdraw, but whether the people's organisation is being formed or not. There cannot be total clarity at every step because clarity itself grows in the process of the struggle. In other words the objective condition of the struggle clarifies the process. All that one can say is that the activists' involvement in the people's struggle, far from being an obstacle to their growth, is essential for their growth. This can be achieved if the activists' involvement remains supportive of the people and does not replace them as several activists tend to do.

Moreover, the fact remains that most action groups are centred round ane or two charismatic individuals. They are able to keep their group together in the initial stages of a micro-struggle with the local vested interests. Once the initial micro-action is over, the group that lacks a macro-perspective and is unable to go beyond local issues, often shifts its emphasis inwards, to conflicts among the activists. Often the momentum and fervour decrease and the people become victims of dissensions within the group.

This is one more area where micro-researchers and institutions have a role to play, but only in a facilitating and not a decision-making capacity. They should, however, be aware in advance both of the approach that is required and the pitfalls. Apart from remembering that they are in a supportive role, they should realise that lack of proper understanding of the local situation can in fact be counterproductive. The activists need to be enabled to analyse both their internal dynamics and the situation of the people. The groups need to be helped to situate their own existence within the context of the people's needs and what are presented as ideological differences within the context of what probably are personality and leadership conflicts. Popular knowledge has to be the starting point of any analysis and beginning from the local situation the groups have to be enabled to reach the macro-level. It is because faith in people's knowledge being outside the western scientific structure, is a subversive instrument as far as the present system is concerned.

> Hence the subversive potential which this knowledge has. Radical action research can grasp this potential and put it in a more effective way in the service of the people that have it, for their own interests (Fals-Borda 1981: 57).

The present writer's experience in several such studies shows that a participatory approach to research can play the role of building up the people from below. One such experience has been a study we conducted on the role of the forests in the tribal economy of Orissa. Initially the activistsas well as the external researchers were not certain about the impact of such a study because many such studies had been conducted by research organisations. All these studies had seemed to weaken the link between the activists and the people who assumed that the action groups were getting money because of these studies. Because of this background, initially we saw the danger of control remaining with the external researchers. Slowly, however, the people viewed the issue as something that was close to their life—something that could destroy their life-system and through group discussions, they began to see the possibility of themselves changing their situation and of safeguarding their forests with which they have a symbiotic relationship.

The role of the researchers was to provide information on the changing policy of the government and on similar reflection by the people continuing in other parts of the country. In other words, they only had to provide information at the macro-level that was not available locally. The action groups translated this macro-knowledge in a language that the people understood. The starting point of this study was knowledge available with the people, who were able to analyse their situation and initiate action based on the awareness of their situation. To the activists, it was an experience in understanding the local situation of exploitation within a national development context and of initiating micro-action within a macro-perspective.

Failure to begin with the local situation and popular knowledge can lead to situations that break the movement rather than build it up. Such, for example, was the case of *Bhoomi Sena* in the Thane distric of Maharashtra once before it was born and again after the first local struggle. The first experience was with the Left parties that encouraged the tribals to grab land and to go to jail. Slowly the *adivasis* were disillusioned with this land

grab movement because they felt that the parties that encouraged it refused to go beyond what the tribals viewed only as symbolic gestures. The electoral needs of the parties did not permit them to go beyond these gestures. This is when the *adivasis* realised that they could attain their rights only through a sustained struggle, not by a one-time land-grabbing action.

As a result of this realisation, once out of jail their leaders began a process of discussion about land alienation. This discussion led to a slow collective awareness of the fact that most of their land had been illegelly taken over by the *sowcars*. The discussion, apart from being a tool of awareness-building, led to a sense of oneness among the tribals and to confidence among their young leaders who had begun the process of discussion A decision was taken to forcibly seize the crops on lands that belonged to the people but were illegally occupied by the moneylenders. When the *sowcars* called the police, the people charged them with illegal activities because the moneylenders, not the tribals. were in illegal occupation of their land. This compelled the subdivisional officer to come to the village and settle land cases. all except one of which went in favour of the tribals (Rahman 1981: 3-4).

However, the *Bhoomi Sena* which was thus born, did not have a strategy beyond crop seizure. Slowly the people began to lose their lands once again to moneylenders. As a solution, their leaders consulted an outside agency that worked out a technocratic solution to land development. The people were not prepared either for this project which turned out to be paternalistic or to the bank loans that they decided upon at a later stage. Their failure was a humiliation to the villagers who had started speaking about their power and self-reliance.

With this a new phase began and a new strategy emerged. The leaders saw the limitations of externally imposed technocratic solutions and the need to beware of internal authoritarianism while building a countervailing power. The leaders had to be only facilitators of a decision-making process in which the biggest possible number had to be involved. Self-reliance had to be the most important virtue they cherished. This self-reliance did not exclude all outsiders. In fact they positively recognised the role outsiders could play in their struggle. But it was not to be the decisive role as in the technocratic approach or the party

conditioned by electoral needs. In many cases it was required as a means to acquire sustaining power during their struggle. But this power had to be acquired by the *adivasis* themselves during their struggle by gaining access to new knowledge, by creating new organisations or by building on what they had. Outsiders were only to support their struggle (ibid: 15-16).

In other words, to the two agencies that intervened in the work of an action group, viz., a political party and a technical support institution, the local people were only receivers of knowledge and had to be dealt with according to the macro-organisation's broader objectives outside their community. To the party they were voters who had to be won over through populist actions without any lasting impact. To the technical institution they were persons who had to receive knowledge and implement projects drawn up by outsiders. Both were bound to fail and lead to the failure of the people because neither had started with the people's needs and knowledge (Fernandes 1982: 706-708).

These in fact, are the problems troubling most action groups in their relations with outside agents. There is first of all, the link with the research, technical and other institutions or organisations that would like to coordinate voluntary action. On the other hand, there is the question of macro-support in their struggles and the role of political parties. While such support is the need of the people, decisions taken according to the needs of the external organisation without getting the people involved in a common search can result in the people and the activists becoming dependent on the outside agency and in obstructing people's organisations. Enough has been said till now on the role of technical institutions and researchers. The question of links with political parties troubles and often breaks up many groups, because they feel the need of external support but the parties do not always think in terms of the people's movements, but of their own macro-objectives.

Political parties

To understand this dilemma, one should recall that most action groups began as non-party political groupings and that disillusionment with the political parties was at the root of the formations. The interview of Comrade Damodaran, a founder leader of

the party, shows how the Communist parties slowly adapted themselves to electoral politics and began to lose their revolutionary fervour. To a great extent, also the young men and women who got into people's movements, were disillusioned both with the development and relief agengies and with the political parties and tried to find solutions with the landless labourers, mostly Scheduled Castes and tribals, who had been neglected by political formations. There were also others like the Institute for Motivating Self-Employment, Calcutta that were formed by those who were disillusioned with strategies of extra-constitutional groupings like the Naxalites and decided to get into a different type of movement (Roy 1983: 72).

In spite of this disillusionment, at some stages after their local struggle begins, the action groups have to face the problem of macro-support. Otherwise they run the risk of being wiped out by the local vested interests mentioned above. That is the problem most of them face today. On the one hand there are those who think that there is no salvation outside political parties and on the other are those who say that the present political parties cannot help the weaker sections to grow. However, even many of those who support the idea of joining a political party concede that the parties have got polluted. A.K. Roy, for example, feels that all working class movements have a politics inherent in them. The so-called non-political working class movements are actually nothing but, toeing bourgeois politics which presupposes the working class as an economic being' (Fernandes 1984: 50). But even he adds that the problem 'is not in the connection with political parties but in the fact that parties in the country today have lost their clear object in political life and have got polluted' (ibid: 50-51).

It is precisely because of this reason that the action groups are disillusioned with the political parties. Very few activists, for example, understand the role played by the leftist parties during tne Emergency and the years that followed. In spite of this disillusionment they have to deal with these parties or have to find alternatives. Some of them think of joining political parties in order to obtain an All-India perspective. As a result, the group gets a definite identity and its ability to withstand repression increases. But it loses its originality and distinctive character of building up organisations of sector that had so far been neglected by the parties. In the process, they do not in any way change

the internal working of the parties, except perhaps to the extent of strengthening anti-bureaucratic forces if a sufficiently large number of action groupsd ecide to join the party (Sethi 1983: 105). There are other action groups that have tried to form autonomous federations not linked to any political party. Many of them are issue-centred federations, but have not survived long beyond the initial stages when the issue brought them together. There are groupings such as the Federation of Action Groups (FAG) in Tamilnadu that have built up a structure but do not seem to take off the ground as a serious force to reckon with. Others have tried 'critical collaboration' with political parties. But given that they are working with a stronger partner they cannot lay down conditions favourable to action groups. In fact the activists do not have any electoral ambitions while the parties that have adapted themselves to electoral politics, end up by forming alliance with them during elections and abandon them after the electoral battle. Thus the people at the micro-level do not get the permanent macro-level support they require (ibid: 105-106).

This is one problem which all action groups have to face sometime during their lifetime and external agencies and researchers need to help them to keep reflecting on the problem and attempt a solution. As one can see from the discussion above, there is no easy solution to this dilemma. That is an additional reason for the supportive agencies to keep an open mind and take a totally participative approach. Too many such agencies end up by attempting to merge the groups with parties or themselves coordinate action groups in order to keep them away from parties. Neither of these approaches can be acceptable, though at this stage of discussion one cannot be certain about a solution that is good for the people. Ongoing reflection and constant sharing of experiences is the only viable strategy. This is where external agencies have a definite role to play, not by controlling the action groups but by supporting them from outside.

Conclusion

We have tried to understand the role of supportive agencies in order to continue the work of the action groups. Several experiences have shown that outsiders have a role to play, in the from

of lobbying or by performing the functions of academicians who help the people with structured surveys, ongoing evaluations and other types of support in moments of struggle (Mehta 1983: 101). But beyond these roles which are to some extent a re-interpretation of their traditional role as researchers, one cannot be certain of the type of support they should give. What is certain is that support is required in order to enable the groups to go be yond local initiatives to a macro-perspective. But the type of support needs to be determined according to the objective situation at a given historical moment and the local context seen within a macro-perspective.

In order to play this supportive role, the macro-institutions themselves need to change considerably. They cannot intervene any more as outsiders who come into an area to transfer knowledge to the local people. They have to be there as supporters of local action. In other words, on their part there has to be receptivity to change in their own outlook and they should facilitate initiatives for change within the action groups and in their strategy (Mathur and Gupta 1983: 13-15). It is this receptivity for change that is lacking in many macro-organisations, particularly in political parties and long-standing development and research institutions. As a result, their intervention in local action can end up in preventing the growth of the people rather than supporting it. That is a challenge all scholar activists, i.e., professionals committed to the task of supporting action for social change, have to face.

5

People's Theatre and Landless Organising in Bangladesh

Ross Kidd
Mamunur Rashid

All over the Third World peasants, workers, women, indigenous (tribal) groups and other oppressed groups are rediscovering the potential of people's theatre as a weapon in struggles for land, better working and living conditions, women's rights and other basic rights. Landless labourers and poor peasants in Bangladesh (Proshika 1980), Kenya (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981) Nicaragua (Bustos 1982), India (Omvedt 1980) and else where are turning to 'theatre by the people for the people, and of the people'[1] as a means of building class and/or women's consciousness, mobilising people fora ction, engaging in struggle, and reflecting on the struggle.

For these popular groups and movements people's theatre represents:

—a medium controlled by the people for expressing their ideas, concerns, and analysis (at a time when other forms of expression and media are outside their control)

[1]In this article this refers to theatre of the people (i.e. dealing with the issues and concerns of the popular classes-the peasants and workers) created and performed by the people for popular audiences (i.e. peasants and workers) 'Of the people' conveys the Brechitan sense of advancing the popular classes.

—a means of resisting the ideas propagated by the dominant class, institutions and media
—a way of recovering, reviving, validating, and advancing the people's own culture and history[2]
—an experience of participation, interaction and self-expression through which people overcome their fears and develop a sense of their own identity, self-confidence and class consciousness (through showing that people can 'act,' can change, things both on stage and in real life)
—a people's curriculum, reflecting popular ideas, concerns, and aspirations (rather than the externally imposed textbooks of conventional education)
—a forum for popular education, bringing people together and building a spirit of solidarity
—a codification or objectification of reality for purposes of discussion (a means of mirroring reality in order to stand back and study it critically)
—a process of popular education—drama as a tool of analysis, of testing out (through role-playing) the limits and possibilities for action and unveiling the contradictions and structures underlying everyday reality
—an organising medium, politicising people and drawing them into popular organisations and struggle
—a means of preparing for struggle—clarifying the target, working out strategies and tactics, and testing out (through role-playing) various forms of confrontation
—a means of protesting against oppression and a means of stirring up people's anger to do something about it
—a form of confrontation and struggle[3]

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[2]This is often qualified to refer only to those aspects of 'the people's culture' which advance popular interests and build resistance against the dominant class (since 'the people's culture' also has imbedded within it elements of ruling class culture). The Latin Americans have emphasised this distinction between 'people's culture' and 'popular culture' in referring to the historical process of accommodation and resistance by native peoples to colonial invasion and cultural domination (Nunez 1982).

[3]One must not exaggerate the transformative potential of theatre. Organising struggle on the stage is different from doing it in real life andt he distinction must not be blurred. Theatre must be linked with organising and struggle. Where these conditions are met, the performance itself can become a form of struggle. For example, some of the organisations of landless labourers in Bangladesh have sufficient organisational strength to openly challenge the landlords; the means they have chosen to do this is to dramatise in the public forum the landlords' acts of injustice and corruption. One group found after a while that it was enough to *threaten* to 'put the landlords on the stage' in order to rein in the landlords' manipulative and exploitative tendencies.

—a morale-booster during periods of struggle—poking fun at the oppressors, celebrating victors, and building up people's spirit.

This groundwell of popular theatre in the Third World represents a resurgence after a temporary setback in the 60s. Popular theatre was a major force in the 40s and 50s when it served as the cultural arm of nationalist struggles all over the Third World, inspired by experiences such as the Communist Chinese 'resistance theatre' of the 30s.[4]

Nationalist movements in Egypt (Landau 1958), India (Biswas 1982: 17; Pradhan 1979), Indonesia (Adhikarya and Crawford 1973) and many other colonial territories used theatre to expose colonial injustice, develop a nationalist consciousness and mobilise support for the liberation movement (Landau 1958; Richmond 1973). The colonial rulers monopolised the modern mass media (radio and newspapers) so the nationalist had to rely on their own 'media'—the dance dramas, songs, poetry, puppetry, drumming etc., out of their own traditions[5] to counter colonial propaganda, clarify issues and information, prepare people for new situations and build up morale and commitment.[6]

Once the 'de-colonising era' was over, however, there was a temporary setback. The nationalists who came to power attempted

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[4]All over China theatre groups toured the rural areas mobilising support for the popular defence against the Japanese (Howard 1971: 67; Snow 1938).

[5]Often this was a syncretic form—a moulding of indigenous and western elements.

[6]Theatre was such a powerful weapon in nationalist hands that wherever they could, colonial forces tried to suppress it. For example in Indonesia in the 40s the Dutch gaoled hundreds of *dalangs* (puppeteers) and burned their puppets (Adhikarya and Crawford 1973); in Nigeria during the same period the British banned several anti-colonial plays by a popular travelling troupe (Clark and Ognude 1979): in Malaysia the colonial security forces were so impressed by nationalist-inspired theatre that they organised their own troupes for counter insurgency propaganda (Mahoney 1976). The Japanese also recognised the power of theatre and in their occupation of South-East Asia (1940-45) imposed strict controls on theatre and deployed hundreds of local troupes to explain their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity propaganda. (This scheme had its double-edge: for example in the Philippines many of the troupes used the cover of local languages and historical symbolism to advance Filipino nationalism (Brandon 1967; Tsuno 1979: 1).

to contain, control or co-opt the cultural movements which had grown out of the nationalist or anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggles. By the end of the 60s, however, the increasing penetration of multi-national capital into the Third World and the growing class divisions, landlessness, and under-employment led to struggles by peasants and workers to defend themselves against the pressure of surplus appropriation and other forms of victimisation and to fight for land, better working conditions, and structural changes. Popular theatre re-emerged as a weapon in these struggles.

From outsiders' theatre as product to insiders' theatre as process.

The resurgence of people's theatre in the 70s and 80s, however, represented not only a quantitative but also a qualitative advance. Until the 70s social action theatre took the form of 'theatre for the people'—theatre performed by middle-class activists, who toured from community to community for audiences of peasants and workers.

While this 'taking theatre to the people' approach did encourage cultural democratisation (giving the popular classes access to a theatre tradition which had been appropriated by the dominant class) it often failed to achieve its educational and organising goals. As an externally induced theatre it reinforced dependence on creative resources outside the community and failed to recognise the cultural strengths of the community (which had not survived colonialism but stiffened resistance against the colonial occupation).

It also represented an imposition of outsiders' agenda and analysis. The peasants were left out of the action, forced into their conventional role of watching someone else's culture, of reproducing their 'culture of silence'.[8] Another problem was the lack of an organisational base. Many of the groups had no links to a movement or organising process. They came into the

[8]The oppressed are oppressed not because they have been denied access to or excluded from 'culture' but because they have been integrated into a structure of domination in which they are treated as more objects of the oppressor's actions. No fundamental change therefore can be imposed from the outside: the oppressed can only achieve 'liberation' through their own actions, through becoming subjects of the process of transformation (i.e., taking control over their material conditions).

community, put on their play, held a discussion and hit the road. Their performances may have created some interest but once they left there was no one to do the follow-up education and organising. Without an organisational base the performance had a limited effect.[9]

'Theatre *by* the people *for* the people and *of* the people' attempts to overcome the above limitations by

—making the peasants the performers, thereby giving them the opportunity to express their own concerns, do their own thinking, and control their own learning process;
—grounding the theatre experience in the community, group, or movement and in an on-going educational and organising process;
—changing the *form* of the theatre activity so that it takes the form of an open-ended or unfinished play—a process of collective play-making in which everyone in the audience participates as actor, director and critic and through it analyses his situation and tries out various possibilities for action (Crow and Etherton 1982).

People's theatre and struggle in Bangladesh

People' theatre has been one of the battle-grounds in the struggle between the dominant and subordinate classes in Bengal for centuries. In its long history of foreign domination and of hierarchical structural relationships, people's theatre has not only reflected the struggles between the dominant castes (Brahmins and Khotriyas) and classes (feudal overlords, foreign invaders, bourgeoisie) and the subordinate castes (Boishyas and Shudras) and classes (middlemen, peasants, artisans, landless labourers) but it has also served as a weapon in this struggle—as a means of reinforcing the domination of the ruling classes or as a tool of challenging their exploitation and rallying popular struggle against oppression.

In pre-13th century Bengal the mythological dramas which had their origins in the puranic epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) tended to reinforce the feudal status quo and the Brahminic

[9]The above is a general picture. There are, of course, other groups doing theatre for the people who are working within or closely connected to popular movements, are sensitive to local issues, and perform open-ended dramas permitting audience involvement and discussion.

hegemony. In the 13th century during the short rule of the South Indian Vaisnava Sena kings, a new form of people's resistance 'theatre' emerged to challenge the caste hierarchy of Brahminical law. *Bhakti*, fervent devotionalism in song and dance, represented the upsurge of the popular classes against the social discrimination and economic exploition of the Brahminic system. The songs condemned the hypocrisy and decadence of the system and advocated a new, more egalitarian order.

In the 14th century, with the coming of the Moslems, mass conversions look place, the language of the courts changed to Persian, and taxes were increased. In spite of this the *Bhakti* movement continued to grow and gain influence among the popular classes. The songs and dances flourished in the villages as part of this movement and expressed both defiance against the foreign rulers and resistance against the Brahminic order though the performance absorbed a number of Islamic influences.

In the latter part of the 18th century, with the arrival of the British and the introduction of education, there was a brief period of 'cultural renaissance'. However, once the Bengali educated elite began to see that their interests could not be accommodated by colonialism, they began to resist alien rule. The new forms of urban theatre learnt from the colonisers became a powerful tool for protest.

When the British brutally enforced cultivation of indigo in Bengal in the mid-19th century, *Nildarpan* (literally, the 'Indigo Mirror') was produced to expose the atrocities committed against farmers who refused to plant their fields with indigo (1870). This play was immediately banned. The nationalist feeling that it aroused provoked the censorship law of 1876 by which the British attempted to suppress anti-colonial cultural expression in the Indian subcontinent.[10] *Nildarpan* was later followed by a number

[10]Theatre was such a powerful instrument for arousing anti-colonial sentiments that it was the first cultural form to be gagged with a censorship law (1876), followed by the vernacular press (1877) and the right to carry arms (1878). The law remains in force today in India and Bangladesh, requiring all playscripts to be cleared by the authorities before a performance license is issued. One group after India's Independence (1947) wanted to perform *Nildarpan* which was written in 1870. When they sent the script to the police for approval, the police wrote back asking them to get the playwright to come to the police station!

of other 'mirror' plays dealing with struggles against the *Zamindar* (large landowners), tea-plantation owners, bureaucrats, police etc.

In the 1900s these spontaneous outbursts of anti-colonial protest culminated in a more sustained nationalist struggle. The 'traditional' theatre of the villages became a symbol for the struggle and the Bengali elite who had previously ignored or denigrated traditional theatre began to revalue it. Tagore and others appropriated these arts and advocated their use in programmes of cultural revival and anti-colonial protest within the context of rural fairs and festivals.

In the 1920s the playwright Mukunda Das transformed the rural folk form of *jatra* which had traditionally dealt with historical or mythological themes, into *Swadeshi* (Nationalist) *jatra* which dealt with contemporary themes—colonial injustice, caste oppression, feudal exploitation, the tactics for anti-colonial struggle etc. The colonial government 'rewarded' him for this innovation by sending him to prison.

In the 1940s all this activity culminated in the creation of a national popular theatre movement, the Indian Peoples's Theatre Association (IPTA). This operated all over India but its strongest contingent was in Bengal. Its initial work was to alert people to the possibility of Japanese invasion and to promote temporary support for Britain's war efforts. In 1943 during the Bengal famine,[11] in which five million peasants starved to death, the Bengal IPTA troupe performed all over India with a play exposing the native hoarders and black marketeers, raising over 200,000 rupees and launching a campaign, 'Save People's Food.'

In 1947 with the departure of the British, the Indian subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan. East Bengal, whose population is primaily Moslem, became part of Pakistan, and their links with IPTA dissolved. When the Punjabi bureaucracy and military of West Bengal became the dominant force in the new state and imposed Urdu as the national language, a bitter revolt erupted. This took the form of a 'language movement' in which songs and dramas played a primary role in stirring up nationalist feelings. The cultural work was so effective that many of the playwrights and actors were arrested. One of the

[11]The famine was man-made: it was contrived by the British to protect their rear from Japanese attack during the Second World War.

playwrights, Munir Chowdhury wrote his most famous play, *Kabor* (Graveyard), while he was in prison. Along with other prisoners he performed it right in gaol.

The nationalist struggle of the 50s and 60s and continuing victimisation by Pakistan's military rulers culminated in the War of Liberation (1971), in which songs and drama again played a mobilising role.

Aranyak: performing for the people

Aranyak was founded soon after Bangladesh's independence (December 1971) by a group of middle-class youth who had been deeply affected by their experience in the liberation war. Along with the peasants and workers they had hoped that the liberation war would lead to a true revolution, one in which land would be redistributed, other feudal structures transformed, and Bangladesh's economy taken over by the people of Bangladesh. When they saw that their hopes were futile, that the rural structures remained intact, the economy still under foreign control, and a small comprador class monopolising the benefits of Independence, they decided to do something about this betrayal of the people's hopes and to fight for change.

The vehicle they chose for their political challenge was theatre and they initially looked to Calcutta's group theatre for their ideas and inspiration. They formed an amateur group made up of about 30 people, most of whom worked in other jobs during the day—e.g., school-teaching, banks, offices, factories, etc. They came together each evening or on the weekends to rehearse or to give performances.

During the 70s they concentrated on producing one major theatrical work a year, all of them on political themes and performed in urban areas. While these preformances suceeded in theatrical terms, they failed to have the desired political impact. Their largely urban, middle-class audience reacted emotionally to the plays, but once they were over, their commitment to social action died. The praise of theatre critics, the publication of scripts, the invitation to do TV work, etc., were no measure of success: in fact the lack of resistance to their work by the ruling class was a clear indication of its limited effectiveness. Their work was becoming, they felt, absorbed by the system and their protest muted.

So they decided to change their audience and turn to the rural peasants who make up 90 per cent of Bangladesh's population. They took their plays out of Dacca and put them on in open-air locations in the rural areas. Thousands of people turned up for these performances but in spite of the enthusiastic reception, the new approach seemed equally problematic.

Performing *for* the people represented the old politics—urban-based left-wing groups preaching revolt to the masses, a kind of political pamphleteering, of manipulating people with slogans and lectures. It had little effect. The spectators remained the passive consumers of someone else's revolution: they had no involvement in shaping and discussing the issues or in creating the play and the performance itself represented an ephemeral, 'here-today-gone-tomorrow' experience in their lives. It represented the same top-down structures of outside groups telling the peasants what to do. In short, it had no mobilising potential in building a self-reliant and critically conscious popular movement.

Making a change: getting the people to do the acting and the thinking

Around this time Aranyak made contact with Proshika, a Bangladeshi rural animation organisation. Proshika's animators, who are permanently based in the villages, work with the landless labourers in a process of popular education and organising. In each village they form groups of 15-20 landless labourers who meet regularly, build up trust in each other, eliminate conflicts among themselves, overcome dependence on the money-lenders (through collective savings), talk about their problems of exploitation and victimisation, and along with other groups organise struggles to confront injustice and corruption by the landlords and to demand better working conditions.

In their residential training programmes which support the animation work in the field, Proshika regularly uses role-playing and socio-drama. In a training workshop held in 1978 the participants got so excited by an experience of making a socio drama that, upon returning to their village, they performed the play to their fellow labourers and later to landless labourers in other villages. Proshika immediately recognised the potential of this educational and organisational tool (which the landless themselves

had demonstrated) and after further experimentation organised a national workshop to promote this new activity.

The Proshika workshop brought together 20 rural organisers (animators), 20 landless group leaders, and a few middle-class cultural workers. It adapted a training approach developed in Botswana whose basic notion was that theatre for social animation should be learned not as an abstract concept but as a practical process grounded in a specific social context. In the Bangladesh situation this meant sending the workshop participants in teams to villages where they met with the groups of landless labourers which Proshika had organised. For three successive evenings the workshop participants listened to and asked questions about the landless labourers' problems and histories—both as individuals and as a group. Then each team, along with a few members from the landless group, worked for 4 days back at the workshop centre to develop a play which was then presented back to the landless group and discused.

One of the real discoveries of the workshop was the power of the landless labourers' own stories. There was no need to fictionalise, to create new stories out of the imagination of the landless. Most of the plays were drawn from *real* experiences such as going into debt, losing or being tricked out of their land; victimisation, exploitation and manipulation as labourers; the struggles of their groups to defend themselves against oppression and to fight for a decent living. Sometimes a collective story was developed out of the stories of a number of landless labourers; in other cases one of the more vital stories of a single landless labourer became the plot-line for the drama.

Another discovery was the amazing acting ability of the landless. In one village, for example, the local group of landless labourers spontaneously decided to develop a play in response to the visit to their village of the workshop team. The play told the story of one of their successful struggles:

> One of their members who had a very small plot adjacent to the irrigation scheme but was too poor to join the irrigation scheme had been unfairly accused of stealing water from an irrigation scheme and forcibly prevented from harvesting his crop. When the group helped him to reap the crop (in order to protect him from the threatened beating) the landlord who was causing all the trouble (as chairman of the irrigation scheme) used his influence to get the man arrested. The group members

rallied the other groups in the area and marched to the police station. The show of force worked and his release represented a major victory for the landless.

The group put on this play for the workshop participants, with almost minimal preparation, on the second evening of the village visits. (On the first evening they simply talked about their problems and stories. However, once they understood the workshop was about theatre, they offered to dramatise the irrigation scheme story.) The first time it was performed it dragged a lot with too much dialogue and not enough action. Two of the group members were invited to join in the day-time sessions at the workshop centre. They came along the following day and participated in a session on basic dramatic techniques, for example showing, not telling, limiting the dialogue, etc. At the end of the day they decided to abandon the workshop: they thanked the workshop organisers but said they would prefer to work with their own group. They said that the other workshop participants would leave at the end of the workshop and they would be left with a play but no performers. So they went back to the village and worked on the play on their own. When they returned a few days later to put on the play it was totally transformed—lots of action, lots of miming (i.e., *showing* their work in the fields and other actions rather than talking about them) and much less dialogue.[12]

The middle-class cultural workers who had been invited to the workshop felt totally overwhelmed by this and other performances by the landless. They had come thinking they had something to teach the landless; by the end of the workshop they felt totally the opposite, that if anything it was they who had learned. The improvisational and acting skills of the landless were prodigious:

[12] This group is continuing to do drama on its own, performing in its own village, in other villages and occasionally at large rallies as a way of encouraging other landless labourers to form their own groups, to build inter-group solidarity, and to fight for their rights. Within their own village drama has become publicly recognised as a powerful weapon against injustice. Having successfully exposed the landlords' corruption, manipulation and brutality on a number of occasions, they have reached the stage where they feel they no longer need to *perform* the drama. Simply threatening to 'put the landlords on the stage again' is enough to caution the landlords and make them think twice about continuing their corrupt or manipulative practices.

there was no way they could match this lively, vital improvised theatre with a scripted, highly rehearsed, urban-produced facsimile.

For Proshika the organising potential was clear. Their own work was undergoing a transformation in which theatre could play an important role. Up until 1979 a lot of their work had gone into developing individual groups, supporting economic projects (fish farming, crop production, etc.) undertaken by these groups, and helping to break the dependence on the moneylender (through the groups' collective savings).

By 1980, however, a new strategy was emerging. Some of the groups began to recognise the limitations of the project work and to challenge the oppression and victimisation they faced in the villages—beatings by landlords, exploitative working conditions, feudal obligations to landlords, loss of their land through cheating, unjust court decisions, etc.

This new type of activity required a new organising strategy—one group on its own was too weak to confront the local power structure. Groups had to work in concert if they were to present a strong enough challenge. A wage strike, for example, could only be successful if all of the labourers in the area supported it.

This meant that more and more landless had to be brought into the 'movement,' more groups had to be formed in each village, and links had to be built among groups in the same area. This shift from 'project' to 'movement' demanded far more organisers than Proshika could provide—it meant that the landless themselves had to become the organisers for building the movement.

For this new work of mobilising and solidarity-building theatre was extremely well-suited: it worked much better than speeches, was not dependent on literacy skill, could be performed by the landless themselves, and touched an emotional cord—an important factor in overcoming the landless labourers' initial fear of doing something, of getting organised, of fighting for their rights.

Theatre also suited the new perspective. By simply presenting the every-day stories of the landless, theatre showed that

- —little could be achieved by economic projects within the existing unequal power structure
- —real change required addressing and confronting incidents of harassment, exploitation, etc.
- —oppression at the village level involved a complex system, including for example collusion among the rural landed class, the bureaucracy, the police, etc.

From performing to animation

Aranyak was equally impressed by the workshop and when a second workshop was held in 1981, one of Aranyak's members helped to organise it. They immediately recognised this new approach as the breakthrough they were looking for.

The landless labourers clearly had an amazing knack for drama. All that was needed was some encouragement to help them gain some confidence and to show them they could do it. Moreover, getting the landless labourers to do the dramas transformed the whole process: the labourers' doing the 'acting' (performing) could become the first awareness-raising and confidence-building step in their taking *real action*. The activity of drama-making could become a group-building experience in which participants deepened their understanding, bolstered their morale, and developed the courage and organisational unity to fight for their rights.

So Aranyak abandoned their role as performers and began to work as animators, working *with* rather than *for* the rural poor. They stopped imposing their own image of the landless labourers' world and encouraged the labourers to create their own dramas. They saw their work in the way Augusto Boal does, as encouraging the peasants to reappropriate the theatre which had been stolen from them. Historically the peasants had made art: art and labour had been united. But with the change of society art had been alienated from the peasants and appropriated by the middle class. Aranyak's role was no longer to sing the songs for the people and keep them quiet. Their task was to show the peasants that they could act, that they could express themselves and enjoy themselves through making drama, that they could analyse their life-situation through this medium, and that it could be used as a weapon in their struggle against oppression and victimisation.

The Aranyak workshops: moving back to the villages

Aranyak's animation work has taken a different direction than Proshika's. Their members have full-time jobs in teaching or the bureaucracy or the private sector and can do theatre only in their spare time. Since they have no funding they have been unable to put their workers into the villages on a full-time basis. Instead they run short, 10-12 day workshops in various areas of Bangladesh,

trying to build up interest in cultural work among the landless and where possible the formation of landless drama groups. Their short-term aim is to get these groups going and operating on their own without an over-dependence on Aranyak. Their longterm aim is to facilitate the development of a national movement of landless drama groups.

The Aranyak 'workshop' is not a workshop in the conventional sense of a formally organised learning experience in a residential setting on a sustained day-long basis. It is more of an engaged experience working with the landless labourers in their own communities and fitting into their own patterns of living and the constraints on them. Instead of bringing the landless labourers out of their own environment, the Aranyak animator moves into the village and works with the landless in their own social situation—staying with them, joining them in their periods of leisure, eating with them, etc.

One implication is that workshop sessions cannot be held throughout the day (as it is possible in a residential workshop): the animator can only meet with the landless on an intensive basis in the evenings: during the day the landless are at work. Another implication is that the 'workshop' sessions are not in an isolated and protected residential environment but take place within the structures of the village and are exposed to the same intimidation and pressures that the landless face every day from the landlords. Unlike the Proshika cultural work in which drama is being introduced as an 'add-on' activity to groups which are already organised, the Aranyak workshops are held in villages with no previous experience of landless organising. The basic objective is to use each workshop as an organising tool, to build a landless group through bringing people together for a drama-making experience. Since there has been no previous animation in the village a good deal of the time is spent in building trust and developing a relationship with the landless labourers.

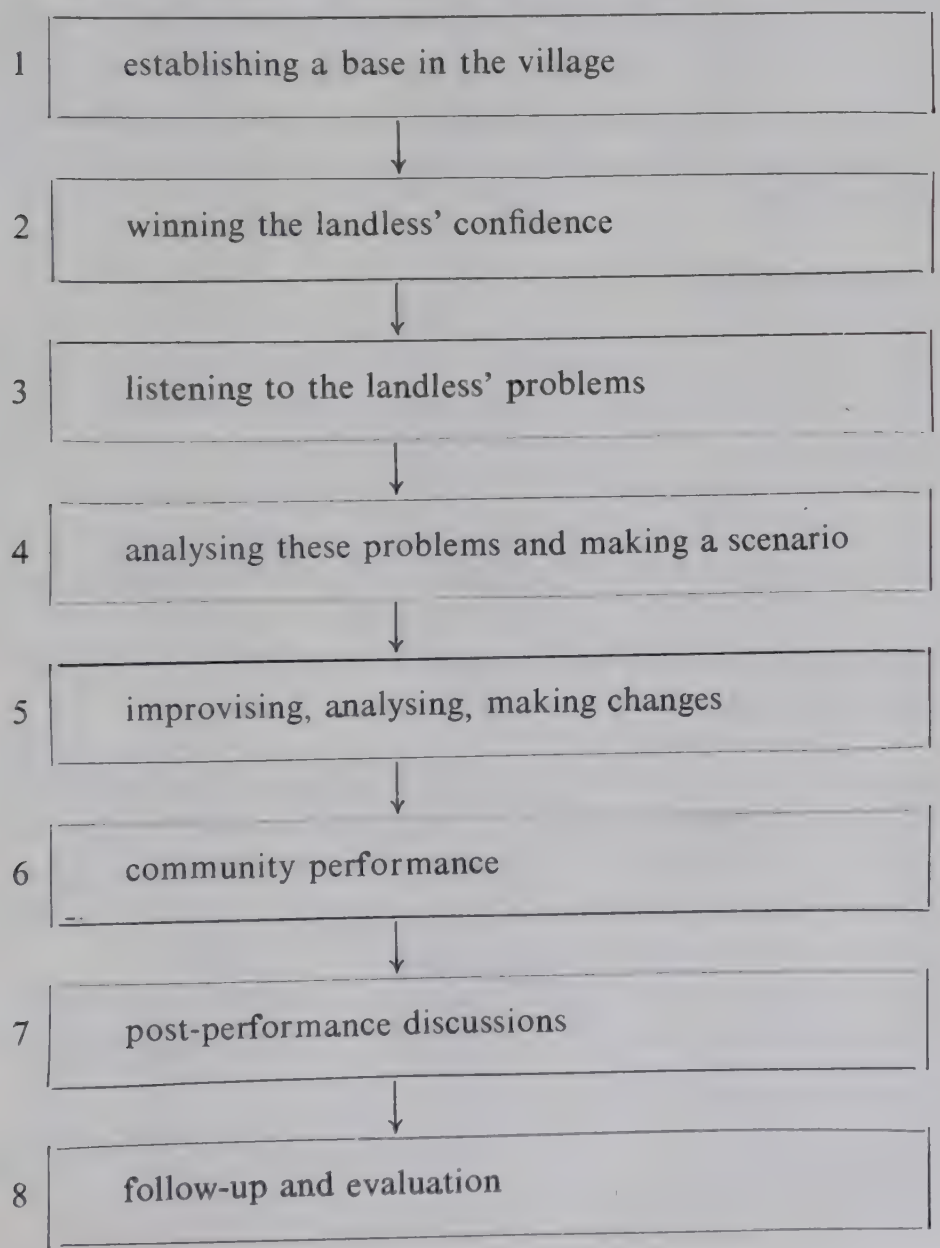
The Aranyak team normally consists of 5 members—4 animators and a coordinator. Each animator is assigned to a different village, all within the same area, and the coordinator provides back-up support, and informs team members about what is happening in the other villages. He also brings the team together from time to time to share experiences and to advise one another.

Setting up a base

The initial obstacle is the landlords. They know it immediately when an outsider enters the village. They come to find out what is going on and to offer hospitality. When they discover the animator's intentions, they at first can't understand:

> Why are you going to work with those poor people? What do they know? We know many stories, we can provide you with actors. Why don't you stay with us?

Each workshop goes through the following process:


1 establishing a base in the village
2 winning the landless' confidence
3 listening to the landless' problems
4 analysing these problems and making a scenario
5 improvising, analysing, making changes
6 community performance
7 post-performance discussions
8 follow-up and evaluation

But the animator resists all offers of hospitality from the landlords. Being associated with them would increase the doubts of the landless and jeopardise the work. The let-out is the school: it provides a non-controversial base for the work, a place that the landless feel confortable about visiting and better than the home of a landless family which would be too exposed, inviting immediate suspicion and possible intimidation.

The animator sleeps on the floor at the school and prepares his own food there. Once the landless get to know him, they come to visit him there; often some of the initial research (i.e., listening to the landless talk about their lives) is conducted there. The local school-teachers, although better off than many of the villagers, are often very supportive. Other allies from the middle class are often the traditional doctors who are popular among the poor villagers. Having their support helps to break down some of the suspicion.

Winning their trust

With the school as a base the animator starts to get to know the landless labourers. He works through a local contact person—a landless labourer who has been identified by others as a potential leader. Sometimes the person suggested is unsuitable but normally the references are correct. The designated person tends to be vocal, militant, and less fearful of the local landed class. The animator starts by winning this person's confidence and over time persuades him to call a number of landless people together to a common place.[13]

At the same time he starts to get to know other landless labourers, visiting them in their fields during the day and meeting them at their homes at night. These encounters are informal—sometimes one-to-one, sometimes with a small informal group. A brief encounter in the fields during the day might turn into an invitation to come for a visit at night.

The object at this stage is to gain the trust of the landless. They are initially suspicious. They have seen other outsiders come

[13]If the process of going through a potential local leader fails, the animator has to develop his own contacts and encourage people to come together.

to their village to talk with the 'big men.' 'Why are you coming to talk to us?' they say. 'Are you here to help us or to spy on us?'

The animator explains that he is not a policeman or a spy or a researcher. 'I've come to make drama,' he says, 'so I'm here to collect stories from you. We want to make dramas with you based on your own stories.' When this fails a strike a chord, he gets them talking about various cultural forms—radio, television, cinema. 'Do these media serve your purpose?' he asks. They respond 'No.' 'Well, why not?' he asks. They explain, after a bit, that none of these media talk about their lives—they only deal with the lives of the rich people. Eventually they begin to see that drama can be an alternative, a means of reflecting their own lives. Then he suggests to them that they can make the dramas themselves. Their reaction is uncertain—'Can we do it? Is it possible?' The animator coaxes them to try it out, to put on a short skit about a real incident in their lives. After a bit of hesitation and some prompting they put on a highly entertaining skit. This breaks the ice, gives them some confidence, and catches their interest. The animator then gets them to talk about the major events in their lives. By remaining quiet and merely listening, showing that he is genuinely interested in what they are saying, he encourages them to tell their life-stories in great detail. Through this process interest grows and the landless begin to say—'This man has come to listen to us, not to talk. He wants to hear our stories, rather than giving us speeches or sermons. We can work with him.' Once this basic trust is established, the animator encourages them to come together and hold regular meetings.

At this initial stage when talking to the landless about their problems, often the landless are reluctant to admit they have problems. When specific questions are asked—such as

> Do you have sufficient food?
> Can you afford to send your child to school?
> Do you get adequate medical care?

the landless give a clear response—'No.' The animator follows this up by questioning them about the food, education and medical treatment that the rich people get. When they comment on the difference, he asks them why. Often the explanation is simply 'It's Allah's will.' When they respond in this way, he asks them

> Why does Allah patronise these people who have been stealing your land and remain silent when you are dying of starvation?

Often this challenge confuses them, but starts them thinking. This process continues in the second phase when the landless come together as a group.

Listening to people's stories

The local contact person calls people together. He organises the meetings and gets people to come. The group normally consists of 30-50 people, the majority landless but a few are marginal farmers, school teachers, traditionál doctors, hawkers, etc. The meetings are held in the evenings—the only time the landless are not working. (Landless labourer work 7 days a week.) Meetings go on until midnight, with people arriving at different times throughout the evening, depending on their work and other commitments. During this phase, the animator continues to make his round of visits during the day building trust, learning more background information, continuing to research the problems together with the landless.

The initial meetings are taken up with story-telling. Each person stands up and tells his story. Many of these stories the animator has heard already—through various informal encounters in the first phase—but this collective story-telling is important: it is only through telling each other their stories that people begin to recognise the *commonality* of their experience—that they have all lost their land in a similar way and that thay are facing the same forms of victimisation, manipulation and exploitation by the landed classes. Almost all of the stories are about moneylending—how a moneylender gives money, takes back an exorbitant interest, and eventually grabs the debtor's land.

These stories are recorded—on paper and/or a tape-recorder—so they can be referred back to from time to time. Often the recording is done during the informal encounters in the initial phase: this, it is felt, is a more accurate account. Once people come together as a group, formalities come in and some people are too shy to expose their whole life story in front of their fellow villagers.

Making the scenario

But this is not always the case. In some groups every person wants to tell his story and in great detail. Then the problem comes of which story to select as the basis for the play. Usually the animator encourages the group members to make one story out of the common elements of different stories—e.g., losing land to a moneylender, the economic demands of marriage (e.g., dowry), being cheated on paper contracts (because of their illiteracy), etc. The more lively and unique experiences also get women into the play. The group itself works out the story-line, arguing about the focus, basis of conflict, the climax, etc.

The animator attempts to be as non-directive as possible, leaving the scenario-making to the group members. Sometimes they get so emotionally involved that the drama becomes a six-hour production. Then the animator intervenes and asks how they might make the story more concise:

> Suppose you only have one hour to tell this story to a man who will leave this place in one hour's time. How would you narrate your life's experience of 50 years in one hour? What would be the main elements?

Then the animator gets them to list the major events in the main character's life:

> My father died, his land was fragmented, I received half of a biga of land, my mother came to live with me, I got married and we had 6 kids, our debts grew, I borrowed from the moneylender, my land was taken away from me, I started to work as a landless labourer, my child fell sick and died.

The group then makes these major incidents the story-line of the drama, and all the minor happenings get chopped out.

Deepening the analysis

In the course of developing the play, the animator encourages the landless to develop their own thinking, to analyse why they are poor and downtrodden, to make the connections between moneylenders, the local courts, the village council, the bureaucracy, etc.

This analysis is important. As Bappa and Etherton (1982) have shown,

> Those who are oppressed already know of their oppression: and a play which delineates this oppression superficially tells them nothing which they do not know already. They know too that there never is a simple solution to their problems: and a play which claims to have the answers is not really to be trusted.

The animator stimulates the landless to analyse their experience through questions, through insistently challenging assumptions and conventional explanations of reality tog et at the underlying structures and contradictions—e.g., the discrepancy between their expressed views about reality and their daily experience of it.

For example, if one of the stories is on the issue of dowry, the animator might ask them who benefits from this practice? When they analyse it they discover that marriage has become a business and women a mere commodity: the whole enterprise primarily benefits the moneylenders who loan people money to pay the dowry.

The animator does not preach or impose pre-digested analyses or use big words like imperialism, neo-capitalism, class struggle. etc. He lets them discover the meaning of these words and concepts themselves in trying to understand their own reality. For example, one group wanted to make a play about the deep tube wells that were being introduced into their village. Instead of branding this 'an imperialistic scheme derived by the multinationals to control Third World Production' the animator simply asks a few questions 'who controls this new technology? Why do they control it? Why is it being introduced? Who benefits?' This was enough to stimulate the group's own thinking. They discovered. for example, that control over this new factor of production had been monopolised by the richer farmers in the area, and that the introduction of this new technology had in fact precipitated a new power structure within the village. What could have been a new means of livelihood controlled by the landless had become. once again, the monopoly of the local elite. They also began to recognise who ultimately benefitted from the tubewells i.e., the multinational who produces them. The landless labourers began to understand 'imperialism' not as a Marxist slogan manufactured in Dacca. but as a specific relationship connecting production in their village to specific multinational corporation.

Another play showed, through a simple but real story. how

Japanese imperialism was impoverishing and killing people in Bangladesh. The story was about 'two-in-one', a Japanese radio/tape recorder which has been imported into Bangladesh in huge quantities and which has become a status symbol in the rural areas. (Bangladesh has a free-port, import-oriented economy which is linked with business in Hong Kong and Singapore.)

In the story a man threatened to divorce his wife unless his father-in-law gave him a two-in-one. To buy the two-in-one the father-in-law sold his remaining piece of land, thus becoming landless. In spite of the gift, the man divorced his wife . . . and soon after that the woman committed suicide.

Improvising and rehearsing the drama

Once a story-line is agreed on, the group starts to improvise the drama. There is need for very little direction and the animator limits his advice to a few points on theatrical techniques—how to stand on the stage, how to project one's voice, 'showing' actions rather than talking about them, etc.

Once the landless see they can do it, they get on with the work and the animator sits back and becomes an appreciative audience. The landless have a wealth of stories and experiences to draw on and they work these into their roles and dialogues with great skill. What is lacking in 'artistic polish' is far outweighed by the exuberance and wit of their acting, their obvious joy in performing, the genuineness of their expression, and their commitment to the ideas and experiences they are communicating. They love playing the oppressor and have a great insight into his character and motivation. Once they get over the initial fear of being victimised, they portray him with great satire, bringing out all his mannerisms and idiosyncracies.

The problem, if anything is not how to get them going but how to contain their enthusiasm once they get started. The animator's job is to help them to be more selective, to decide on the essential points for each scene and to cut some of the extraneous details.

By this stage the group has become very interested and involved and the initial reserve has gone. The group members take on the responsibility of finding a place to hold rehearsals and to light them. Everyone begins coming at the right time for rehearsals and the morale is high.

Organising the performance and follow-up

Once the play is ready, the group publicises it through word-of-mouth and performs it in front of the whole village in a public place. A day or two later all the groups from the four villages come together to a common place to present their plays to each other. By this stage so much interest has been generated that people from each village come with their troupe to the final performance.

After the final performance each animator spends 2-3 days doing 'follow-up'—discussing the issue of the play with the landless, evaluating the whole experience with them, and recording their views. He encourages them to continue with the drama work on their own and to form their own organisation. He stresses the importance of building unity, of overcoming the petty conflicts and quarrels among themselves, and forming an organisation to defend their interests.

Finally he exchanges addresses with them and leaves. Often the animators receive letters from the village, giving their feedback on the workshop and describing what has subsequently happened in the village. The animator maintains contacts with the village group, through correspondence and occasional visits—but he tries on the whole to stimulate their independence and self-reliance. For this purpose groups in the same area are encouraged to maintain contacts and support each other.

The landlords retaliate

But changes in the village or even talked-about changes do not take place without disturbing the *status quo*. Once the landless start meeting together as a group there is immediate suspicion. Once it becomes clear that this is not some whimsical diversion but a serious examination of what is happening in the village, the landlords intervene.

Even at the initial stage some of the landlords spread rumours and try to sway the landless againt the animators. When the process reaches the rehearsal stage this opposition becomes even stronger. In a number of cases the landlords have sent thugs to break up the rehearsal and threaten the group members.

In one case the group had developed a story on a local moneylender. This local moneylender was so influential that he could

manipulate local politicians on the village council and local officials of the bureaucracy. When he heard about the play, he sent them to stop it. The village council chairman came to the rehearsals and accused the group of manufacturing lies. The group defended the authenticity of the story and refused to be browbeaten. Later the chairman sent some *goondas* (thugs) to break up the rehearsals: the *goondas* threatened to beat the performers and most of the performers went home without finishing the rehearsals.

But the animator and a few of the performers stayed behind to confront the *goondas*. In the end the animator had to use his class position to fight back:

> Look, we come from Dacca. (The *goondas*: 'We don't care. We'll not even spare you!'). We know many things and if you touch us you'll be in trouble. You may be running this local show but we know bigger people—for example the inspector-general. If you bring in your local big-shots, we'll call in our big-shots.

This counter-threat seemed to work and the confrontation ended without violence. But the next day the group had to find another rehearsal space. They appealed to other people in the area who were opposed to the moneylender and council chairman. A meeting place was provided and the rehearsals continued with a new scene being added to show the collusion between the moneylender and the local officials—and the group gave its performance without being stopped. The council chairman and moneylender were angry but helpless.

In another case the local power elite tried to sabotage the final performance of a play. The play in this case was about the local bank manager who had been taking 40 per cent of the loan given for agriculture as a bribe. When the bank manager heard about the play, he paid some *goondas* to stop it. They went to the performers' houses and threatened the actors, saying:

> If you put on this play we will not spare you. Why are you wasting your time with these people from Dacca? They'll leave tomorrow and where will you be? This play won't give you food to live . . . so why all this nuisance?

In spite of these threats the landless were determined to go ahead with it. They said—'This is our chance to speak our own truth.' So they continued the rehearsals and told everyone in the area to come to the final performance which was to be held at

the school. The bank manager then pressurised the headmaster to stop the group from using the school field for the performance. However, by this time it was too late. All of the villagers from the surrounding area had gathered. When they heard that the performance was being prevented, a huge discussion developed and the actors explained everything. The discussion itself raised the major points of the play—the bribery, corruption, use of *goondas* to threaten people, collusion among local officials, the various attempts to stop the play, etc. In a way there was no need for a play—the discussion had served the purpose, making people aware of the bank manager's corruption and manipulations and the need to do something about it.

But the crowd was so incensed that they insisted that the play be acted and demanded that the headteacher provide the school's electricity to light the performance. People kept coming and eventually over 3,000 people had gathered. The headmaster grew afraid and at 8 p.m. he finally gave in. The light connection was provided, a stage was quickly erected. and the performance was given without further opposition.[14]

Immediate impact of the workshop

What has been the effect of the workshops? The most significant impact has been the change in people's consciousness. Before the workshops many of the landless were resigned to their situation, explaining their impoverishment as the result of bad luck or the will of Allah. They saw no contradiction in their society. They were on the whole passive and sceptical about making any change in their lives.

Once they produced a play and found their life portrayed in these plays, they became much more conscious of the exploitation and victimisation which was keeping them down. More than

14. During the arguments between the group and the bank manager in the school headmaster's office. the animator surreptitiously taped the conversation. When the bank manager discovered that all of his threats had been recorded on tape, he became afraid and tried to bribe the animator, first offering 1,000 rupees, then 2,000, then 5,000. and finally 10,000. This further case of attempted bribery convinced the group to go ahead with the performance.

that, they began to recognise that they could do something about the exploitation and manipulation if they could get organised. Part of this growing awareness was a heightened self-confidence, an awareness that they could do something—they could make a play and they could also organise to make demands and fight against oppression.

In a few cases the workshop resulted in some immediate action. For example, one workshop was held in a fishing community whose livelihood had been destroyed by the damming of a river further upstream. The fishermen decided to make their play about the land created by the silting of the river. This land had been grabbed by the larger landowners in the area, even though there is a policy in Bangladesh that this kind of land should be given to fishermen. The play inspired the fishermen to get organised and to occupy the land. There was lots of resistance from the landlords but in the end the fishermen prevailed and some of the large landowners had to leave the area.

The landlords try to coopt the process

Instant action, however, is rare. The workshop is only two weeks long and this is only enough time to get an organisation-building process started. While the experience does open their eyes to the possibility of change and the importance of organising, it is too short to solidify a group. Once the animator leaves there is a power vacuum which the landlords attempt to occupy. The landless remain heavily dependent on them—for jobs and loans—and this dependence can be manipulated.

In a few cases, for example, the same landlords who have fought against the workshops become the group's new patrons once the animators go. They offer to pay the groups and since many of the landless are unemployed or have little income, it is difficult to refuse these offers. In this way the landlords gain control over the landless' weapon, then turn it around to serve their interests. The groups stop performing plays on their own stories and put on plays commissioned by and paid for by the landlords —plays on themes of romance or on projects which fail 'because the workers are lazy,' or on other victim-blaming themes.

In other cases landless drama groups have been hired by government agencies for short-term contract work as propaganda

agents for government—putting on plays, exhorting peasants to 'plan their families' and 'build latrines' (as if these victim-blaming measures will on their own without structural changes transform the livelihood of landless labourers), 'participate in self-help projects on canal building' (the landless labourers do the work and the landlords, who can make use of the irrigation canals, get the benefits).

What comes next?

Over the past year *Aranyak* has run 25 workshops along these lines in over 100 villages. This experience has demonstrated both the potential and the limitations of this new approach. The shift from performing to animation has not only magnified the impact of their work, reaching out to much larger numbers, but it has also transformed the quality of the interaction.

Up until a year ago Aranyak put on political plays *for* the people—imposing their own understanding or perspective of the world, relating to people in a didactic or 'banking' way, and limiting their encounter to one-off performances. Now they are working *with* the people, building up the people's capacity to put on plays and do their own analysis of their situation, and starting a more sustained process of conscientisation and organising.

The limitations are those of a process which is still being developed. A single workshop is too short to build a self-reliant landless organisation. It needs follow-up. *Aranyak* is working on a follow-up programme for these fledgling groups, involving

—encouraging groups in the same area to come together on a regular basis to exchange experiences, skills, and ideas among themselves;

—organising regional and national festivals and workshops in which landless groups can come together and plan the development of a people's theatre movement;

—building contacts with other teams of animators working in the villages (e.g., *Proshika*).

One of *Aranyak's* main concerns is to mobilise the landless without building a dependence on *Aranyak* itself. As a middle-class, urban-based group they recognise the limitations of their organisation and the vacillating potential of their team members who may lose interest and drop out. They are also aware of the

possibility of their taking a leadership position within the landless movement and later, because of their classposition, working against the interests of the movement. By promoting horizontal contacts and mutual support among the landless groups and by encouraging the development of animators drawn from the group, they hope to avoid this dependence. As MECATE (the Nicaraguan peasant theatre movement) is doing, they hope eventually to have the bulk of animation work carried out by landless labourers themselves.

In a sense their work is just starting. They now realise that to make any significant impact they need a sustained animation programme of over 10 years. At the same time they recognise the real dangers and obstacles that liea head, including the victimisation and repression of cultural groups. Finally, the links between the village-based work and bigger social and political events of the country remain to be worked out.

6

Some Dilemmas Facing Action Groups: Reactions from Activists

Walter Fernandes

Several scholar activists have reflected on the situation of the action groups and have attempted to find solutions to some of the problems they face. However, the activists in the field have rarely written anything about themselves. Therefore, *Social Action* approached some activists and a few scholars who support the work of the action groups for their reactions to the issues raised by scholars, political parties and others about the role played by outside elements in their work. These external factors included the role played by the parties, foreign aid, etc. We asked the following questions: (1) The role of foreign aid in action groups: its positive and negative impact; (2) The type of political support which the action groups require and the role of political parties; (3) The role of economic and technical inputs in building people's organisations; (4) The relationship between micro and macro-level structures in people's organisation; (5) The role of outside activists, particularly the animators in building local people's organisations; (6) The role of religion either in supporting or opposing people's organisations; (7) What role do women play in the movement? We are reproducing the reactions of these persons. Nimai Bhai, Coordinator of the *Bana Bharati Seva Kendra*, Koraput, Orissa, speaks of the primacy of the people in the movement and the secondary role of the action groups.

Dinanath Manohar, formerly an activist with the *Shramik Sanghatana*, Dhulia District, Maharashtra, discusses the macro-options which the activists should always have while being involved in the field where action is essentially at the micro-level. Nalini Nayak of the Programme for Community Organisation, Trivandrum, discusses the role of political parties and of foreign aid while Jagdish Pradhan, Friends' Association for Rural Reconstruction, Khariar, Orissa, gives his views on the security of the activists, the limitations of foreign aid and the need of coordination in voluntary action. Rajesh Tandon, Coordinator of the Society of Participatory Research in Asia, New Delhi and Ganesh Pandey, a trade union leader from Kanpur discuss the dichotomies forced on the activists by outsiders. They speak in particular of the role of political parties, of research institutions and of foreign aid.

Action groups are for the people (*Nimai Bhai*)

You have asked me about the class division between the activists and the people. A large number of activists belong to the middle classes and they seem to be finding it difficult to relate to the people and sometimes they may end up by themselves doing the work for the people and there is a feeling that very few of them lead to people's organisation. This happens mostly because of lack of proper training. They are emotionally geared up to service when they come to the social service line. These emotions need to be channelised for which proper training is necessary. The middle class people have the susceptibility to adjust to any other society. And those workers who adjust to the lower middle class can survive. So in my view there should be an initial training of these workers. For example, I came from an upper middle class background but it was my emotional commitment that sustained me in the initial stages. When I first joined the work, I had a rift with the activists and I changed over to work among the tribals and I had to adjust to the situation and this is a continuing process for a man who is involved in this work.

The action groups themselves can be divided into several classes. The group that actually emerges out of a people's movement and as a result the people feel that the activists are their part and parcel, these action groups survive. Normally new organ-

isations should learn from the groups that have built up such an approach and if a strategy of becoming part of the people is not followed, then there will certainly be a rift in the action group itself.

Regarding the funding agencies, if the aid is democratically utilised, then there will not be any problem in the group itself. However, there are several factors to be considered. In some cases, the activists do not use the foreign aid properly and leave themselves open to criticism. What is more important is that sometimes the funding agency tries to interfere in the working of the group. When an action group applies for foreign aid, it should be clear to all that a funding agency has no role to play inside an action group. It is particular about its funds being properly utilised but it cannot impose its policies on the groups. Besides, there are persons who think that some action groups continue endlessly in a place because of foreign aid. For example, there are those who think that many young men and women opt for work in the rural areas even when they could have got a good job. Later they are too old to get a job, then they get married, have a family and have to think of the situation of their family.These persons state that the fact that foreign aid keeps coming helps these activists to remain there and that they become a permanent structure. In the process the people may not grow and foreign aid becomes an important factor in this lack of growth.

The group should realise that it is for the people, not for their own interest though sometimes the group's interest and that of the people coincide. I feel that these groups should join together in a particular area and fix the time limit for them to quit. Within that period they should form the local people's organisation and come out. Occasionally they will keep in touch from the outside and not stay in that area. In other words, the group should be mobile and after a few years they should move on to another area.

This mobility will become very difficult if the group has adopted a methodology wherein the people become dependent on them. If they go away before the local cadre is developed, the work collapses. Suppose a group of three works in a project, one will remain there and the others should be educated to start other programmes. One worker will be linked with a project and so

there will be no split in authority. And that is a method which could emotionally satisfy the young people and at the same time, expansion of this type of work will be helpful.

Then there is the other problem—support from outside the group including political parties. My own feeling is that a social worker should have a link with different persons but should not be under the control of any influences. He should work independently with his own views and support and strengthen his views to intensify his knowledge in this life. When any worker or any group is linked with some political agency, they are ideologically stamped and since the role of political parties of India is in a splitting stage, mostly they are for their own self-interest and not for the interest of the people, social organisations should have their own independent stand.

As for the role of research and other institutions the groups need their support. It may be support mostly to develop knowledge from two sides and at the same time sharing of experiences, and also collaboration in certain ativities. My feeling is that this type of collaboration is necessary at this stage in our country, because no anti-organisation is in a position, be it old or new, to be self-sufficient with just their own ideas. So this type of collaboration is necessary.

There is also the question about the role of women. You see many of these organisations are of men and they may not take the problems of women into consideration. In our society and in particular at the grassroots level, women play the most impor tant part in social, economic and politcal life. So it is an extremely important factor that women should be included in our programme from the very begnning. In case certain groups have no agency for that they should create it themselves. What we did in *Bana Bharati* was to start educational programmes because at that time literacy in the Koraput district was around 0.2% or something like that. We took up this training programme for all, not merely for women and created a cadre of workers who are now political leaders and some of them have joined the government. Then we started training more women workers. At that time the government did not know about the need of teachers, nurses or mid-wives and we had to show thei. need through our work. We have to show the examples that are going to work in the tribal area among the extremely poor people. The groups

should be in touch with these ideas and should start work in that area and that will be helpful to the people. At every stage they should arrange their work in such a way that both men and women should go side by side. But in a tribal area women should get the first priority.

You have asked me about the role of religion and of the government in social change. The present position in India is that politics is the entrance to every profession and many consider it the only remedy. Religion itself is losing its hold on our society. Even among the tribals, the old beliefs are losing their strength and we must see how far these practices will continue. Politically, though we claim that it is a democratic administration, we have not educated our people in the last 35 years in the spirit of democracy. It has been used for the benefit of the ruling class. So at this stage which is a very critical stage for our country, nothing concrete can be said about the role of religion and of the government.

Micro-options and macro-perspective (*Dinanath Manohar*)

In the latter part of the 1960s, a number of action groups emerged and the majority of them became active in the rural areas. In the initial period, many of their leading activists were outsiders from a middle class background. But what differentiated them from local leaders was not their 'Middle Class Origin' but the fact that they were exposed to the broaders ocio-economic political reality of the country and were quite wary of the superficial politics of all the established parties. Despite their being under the influence of different ideologies, all of them were dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs and wanted radical change in the situation. Moreover, they implicitly believed that to change the existing socio-economic reality in the real sense, social action had to begin at the micro-level.

With their faith in people's power, these action groups identified themselves with specific sections of the labouring population. Often these sections of the population were the most oppressed and of the lowest strata in the caste hierarchy of the Hindu society. With sincerity and openness of mind the activists tried to identify themselves with these oppressed sections in every possible way. They picked up the local dialect, adopted local costumes, used

local terminology to describe social relations, let themselves be influenced by the customs, traditions, legends and even superstitions of the people. They strived to be the voice of the people and articulated the frustrations and the dreams of the oppressed. Because of such total identification with specific sections of the oppressed, these action groups succeeded in a short span of time in mobilising the people and managed to involve their men and women in mass action. They infused the people with elementary social consciousness and awakened new hopes and self-awareness in them. They succeeded in making the people participate in a sustained mass action, with the action programme which was a direct response to the concrete micro-social reality of the people.

This upsurge and mobilisation were possible precisely because in normal situations, individuals and sections of a society act only in relation to the micro-social reality they live in and not in relation to macro national reality. In fact, for the specific sections of the population macro-national reality means nothing but the concrete immediate micro-reality surrounding it. Here micro-social reality represents the sum of economic, political, ideological and socio-psychological factors that influence directly the day-to-day life of the people.

The action groups acted in response to their immediate micro-social reality and so could activate the local oppressed population. By activating the people, they succeeded in bringing changes in the concrete relationships between the oppressed and their oppressors. Though these changes occurred only at the micro-level, and were minor in nature, they were, however, very real and significant for the sections of the oppressed people affected by them.

Up to the first half of the seventies, the number of such action groups and their strength kept on increasing. Efforts were being made to bring these action groups closer to each other and to establish channels of communication between them. Some of the action groups who were quite successful in building strong people's movements, tried to duplicate or replicate their experiment in other parts of rural India. Some enthusiasts began to paint a rosy picture of the possibility of creating an allied force of the action groups and the revolutionary role of such an alliance. The whole national social scene was volatile, the masses were restless, and the atmosphere was such that political parties and their leaders were under heavy pressure from the masses to act and to act in unison.

The declaration of the Emergency and the corresponding curbs on mass activities stunned the action groups for some time, but it could neither wipe off mass organisations completely nor stop mass activities fully. But this upheaval at the macro-level made action groups painfully aware of the limitations of the power wielded by the mass organisations vis-a-vis the tremendous repressive potential of the forces at the macro-level. They began to doubt the validity of their new style of organising, the style that emphasises the need to do intense work in a specific area with a specific section of the oppressed population, but not go beyond that level. They also realised that successful experiment of one place cannot be duplicated in another area. They also realised that all action groups have evolved their own separate organisational forms and that their relationship with the higher castes, with the ruling classes, with the police machinery, with the state bureaucracy, with religious and conservative institutions, with the bourgeoisie and with the left political parties were quite dissimilar to each other. It seemed that there were more dissimilarities than similarities among the action groups. The whole atmosphere was such that the similarity in their approaches to the factors such as internal organisational democracy, the role of leadership, relationship between the masses and activists, the methodology of politicising etc. were either not perceived or taken to be of no significance. The perception of each action group seemed to be localised and narrow and their activities totally divorced from the national political situation. It seemed that their perceptions, formed on the basis of micro-social realities, had no or very distant relationship to the macro-social reality. It seemed that these action groups would either get gradually disintegrated or would get absorbed by the national political parties or trade unions.

But time has belied these expectations. Now in the eighties, one can notice that though weak and to some extent in a state of stagnation, the old action groups are still in existence; and though the rate of increase is low, new action groups are still emerging.

It is true that action groups are facing a dilemma, but not in the sense that the situation demands a choice between equally undesirable alternatives of either identifying with specific sections of the people to act in consonance with the micro-social reality or of identifying themselves with some national political organisation in order to act within the macro-social reality. The nature

of the dilemma is rather of a perplexing problem of linking the various mass movements which get shaped in response to micro-social realities and the broader political action which gets shaped in response to the macro-social reality.

It must be realised that no micro-social reality corresponds exactly to the macro-social reality. The micro and macro-social realities form what can be called bordering regions where transition from the psychology of the fragmented sections of the oppressed people to the proletariat masses and that from the proletariat masses to the fragmented sections of the oppressed takes place. The regions where the micro and macro-environments interact is a battleground, the strategic typography of which must be understood by social activists committed to the new social order.

The problem of understanding the various mediations through which micro and macro-realities interact, gets more perplexing and complex, considering the special characteristics of the Indian society. Not only society as such, but the labouring population of India also, is fragmented by the numerous divisive factors like language, province, religion, caste, class, community, education, sex, traditions, customs, etc. Uneven economic development and the peculiar style of politics have only widened the gap more. It is perhaps more so of the rural than the urban population, but it is a bitter truth that various permutations and combinations of these divisive factors have resulted in the existence of numerous fragments of different micro-social realities.

The problem needs to be understood because mass organisations which get formed and act in response to the micro-social realities, must have relative autonomy, which alone can ensure sustained participation of the oppressed in mass movements. It also demands clearer analysis since no single model of mobilising the masses can be duplicated. Hence, similarities in the approach of various aspects of organisational practices of different action groups must be discovered and emphasised rather than harking on dissimilarities in concrete organisational forms. It must be understood that the masses act not in response to the call of leaders or parties, but in response to the immediate social environment they exist in and every labouring individual dreams of change in his social environment, and in his own relationship to his surroundings. The action groups need to cater to these micro-aspirations within a macro-perspective.

Where are the action groups today? (*Nalini Nayak*)

There has been a great amount of debate on the role of action groups in the socio-political context over the last few years. The fact that action groups have mushroomed all over the country, the fact that they have been able to stimulate a certain amount of spontaneous mass action in situations of real exploitation, the fact that they claim to be independent of political parties, the fact that the majority of them are funded from abroad etc., have all been reasons to attract attention of the powers that be and incur the criticism of the left political parties that have so far been at the helm of political activism. The purpose of this article is not to enter this debate because there is no common platform or ideology of the action groups from which to take a stand in the face of this criticism. It only strives to share some of the dilemmas and questions which face groups that aim at organising the poor to fight for their rights.

The formation of action groups is the first area of concern. Certain groups start off as radical formations aspiring to directly transform society. Such groups revolve around one or two individuals either highly motivated or deeply frustrated by past experiences. Radicalism without a historical perspective gradually finds the group disintegrating leaving behind irreparable scars in the areas of their involvement. Others start off more modestly, with economic or even welfare programmes. Those of such groups that are sincere to the growing contradictions in such programmes are forced to raise questions themselves, develop their own self-critique and then discover that there is no other alternative but to launch into organisational activity. Such groups may continue to be politically naive but surely develop a sense of the people and the people's participation which gradually develops the momentum of mass action but outside the national party political stream. Then there are other groupings originating in the context of a political debate, conscious of the national political streams, entering areas where the parties do not tread and eventually linking the grassroots to the political streams.

These are only very broad generalisations. Hence it is even more difficult to speak of action groups as a whole. There are nevertheless some common situations that all groups have to confront. To start with a major one, the relationship between the

micro and macro-levels, for instance, to tackle the symptom or the cause of the disease. The more serious groups, while working with the symptoms of poverty are also serious about tackling its causes. For instance, in struggles with local money-lenders or landlords which may initially be localised or isolated, a gradual polarisation develops and large-scale opposition builds up—the oppressed on the one hand and the vested interests on the other. Some desperate and brave attempts are made to face the oppressor but support structures to tackle problems of such a magnitude do not exist. At this juncture, the stand of the left parties in discerning these tendencies and offering a platform or leadership to further the polarisation does not exist. Large-scale mass actions springing from micro-efforts, be they among the tribals, fishermen, labourers of the unorganised sector, have fizzled out due to lack of a national rallying force as such sectors seem to be out of the purview of the left because of their lack of revolutionary potential.

Action groups, as the very term denotes, concentrate on action. Only a tiny minority ever goes on to study in greater detail the emerging contradictions in the field. Only a tiny minority continue a deepening of theoretical analysis. Only a tiny minority get into related aspects of technology in the sectors in which they are involved. A large majority are trapped in litigation, which is also inevitable. Because of these limitations, the organic intellectuals do dot emerge and this is probably why there remains a gap between the university-trained intellectual-activist and the people on the one hand and the lack of real creative and theoretical feedback for action on the other.

The human problems that action groups face are also numerous. Most groups start off with a couple of highly idealistic people. If such people are really emotionally strong they end up crushing the others in the group. If they are weak, they end up totally broken. There are only a few groups in which efforts are made to consciously build up new forms of togetherness, of democratic decision-making, of solidarity and openness with others which in our larger Indian society cause much suspicion and disregard. One major concern is that no group has been able either to overcome the unequal relations between women and men—action groups being as much the victims of the patriarchal heritage as the rest of our society. Many groups have also not

been able to find the optimum blend between activism and the need for emotional re-creation. Many activists tend to get so drained and even sick that the survival of groups as alternative forms of social relationships is threatened by these basic contradictions within.

I cannot close ignoring the role that foreign aid has played in the growth and development of the action group phenomenon. There may be just a handful of groups in the conntry that have built up on their own resources—but again resources of some kind have been necessary to maintain them. Nevertheless, India is probably one of the few countries that had an earlier tradition of motivated people taking up the cause of development and national liberation outside the religious fromework, like the Gandhians for instance. So even before the start of the action groups, young people were making definite life options of commitment to a cause and there have continued to be such individuals to this day. The chapter of foreign assistance started in the last years of the 1960s but actually grew in the mid-70s and in a way coincided with the growing sense of economic disintegration, unemployment, police oppression (the Emergency). Unfortunately, they also owe their origin to the fact that traditional or existing streams of organisational involvement, including the parties, could not absorb these idealistic elements who were keen to get constructively involved.

Aid that originated as a result of the pricking consciences of the West was thus readily received by the developmentalist groups in India who thought that India's poverty lay in the lack of financial resources. At this juncture I must mention that Christian educational institutions played a very negative role and precipitated this phenomenon. While seeking to instil motivation and commitment in students in a so-called 'Christian tradition,' they ignored totally the historical and national perspective. This situation contributed largely to the phenomenon of small independent formations answering a 'Christian calling.' Initially it was also the Christian institutions that made financial support available and this gradually became an accepted trend. What developed probably naively in its origins, has become a conscious phenomenon today made possible by the fact that extensive and indiscriminate and still exists.

Thanks to a greater politicisation in a few aid-giving nations,

some of the indiscriminate funding comes to a stop by asking the questions 'Who does it benefit? What does it create?' This has happened also due to the fact that the phenomenon of the action groups has become a subject of research and probably of a Ph.D thesis too, thus exposing the pros and cons of such developments in the national framework and making people think.

People come before the action group (*Jagdish Pradhan*)

There have been so many action groups for so many years and yet hardly any people's organisation seems to have come up and very few action groups have pulled out of their area leaving the people. Now, you have asked me whether it is because they cannot get down to trusting the people or because they depend on foreign aid, or the groups lack internal democracy or because they have not developed a methodology to build people's organisations.

In Orissa several organisations were doing some kind of social work, but they rarely organised the people or helped them to build their organisations. Only recently i.e., after 1974-75 some groups have started working. But all this started with what are called spearhead teams. In all those organisations the workers are taken as employees. So from the beginning most of their workers have some hope of a lucrative job and although they have been talking about building people's organisations, they are looking at it more as a professional job. They are not interested in involving themselves with the people's problems or organisation.

You have also asked me about the security of the activists and the role of foreign aid in it. I think that security is necessary but it is not security but a reasonable living that is necessary for all workers. It is not just security. But as I see it, the outsiders as we call ourselves—somebody not belonging to the local area—must not tend to be leaders but must help the people to take up their own leadership. But we have certain roles to play. For this kind of work I do not think that till now there is any problem of getting funds. We can go along with this kind of work without technical leadership but just by mobilising the people, I do not see any problem of security. I do not feel insecure. I do not think that anybody can be insecure in this field because I have

seen many old people still working for the mobilisation of the people and continuing their work.

On the other hand, we should remember, that the activist has no right to compromise the future of his children. This sacrifice is not desirable even for a bachelor. If he is doing more work, it means that he is taking the responsibility of some other local people. So in any case one should not do as the Naxalites who sacrifice themselves in the name of the people. They are working for 20-24 hours for months and years forgetting their families and everything. But I do not think that this should be the case with any social activist. He should generally have resonable work having time for leisure, his family and personal life without in the process taking over leadership from the local people. This type of overwork goes against the people.

As for foreign money, sometimes this aid is a temptation for many people especially the villages. They are more available when they get the word that a lot of funds are available. Because the people are struggling and are bonded, sometimes the funding agencies become impatient and give money. But they underestimate the strength of the people and that is bad. I have seen it in two blocks. In one block they are given a lot of funds to support their movement whereas in the other block they are not given any funds but have continued for even a longer period and more successfully. But when funds come the leaders who were previously taking up the movement will involve themselves with the monitoring of the economic programmes. Besides, sometimes a conflict begins because some groups are getting funds while others are struggling but not getting funds etc. In that way it affects the people. Then even at the workers' level there are some workers who may not be totally committed. But the funding agencies support some of them and upset the programme.

I am not for stopping all foreign funds but only money for administration and educational programmes. The people should contribute for that. I am not against foreign funds for other development activities. It is true that we work among people who are practically starving. But in spite of that in our area in each block they are contributing Rs 8,000 per year. So the administrative costs should be kept below that. Besides that they have to take up some economic activity which is educational like taking a contract work from the block. They will have to fight

and take a contract work and out of that if they get some funds they will be used for their managerial expenses.

As for foreign aid for economic activity, if there is danger of breaking up the group or making the people dependent, then it is not desirable. The groups should be able to manage if the funds do not come and they can be got only if they strengthen their organisation. Besides, a great amount of money allotted by the government for various programmes goes unutilised because foreign funds are easily available and it is a bit more difficult to get home funds. When groups thus depend on funding agencies, they lay down conditions that are not fair. Besides, by offering big sums of money for relief, the agencies can break up a genuine people's organisation. We should try to tap our own resources and try to get the funds of the government as much as possible and this will perhaps reduce corruption in the bureaucracy. That is why many groups have decided on the policy that when government money is earmarked for a project, they will not request any other agency but will use these funds. But for some other programmes in case of distress and other disasters, foreign funds can help.

Another question you have asked is about the support of political parties or of other macro-organisations. There are some organisations who can actually liaise with some other organisations or government officials or some senior government people. In that case the people may not feel the need of some other political support. But when any people's movement really begins, also opposition increases and they need outside support. If there is no other support then the people can take a step towards the opposition political parties. But somehow we have not found a good way to solve this problem. We keep telling the people about different political parties. But I do not know how it will help. As a former MLA clearly told us, their aim is to get votes and that he influences and mobilises the people only for this purpose. This may not solve people's problems.

The question is whether greater coordination among the action groups themselves can provide an alternative. Some coordination among them is necessary at the state level. This can initially replace the vacuum of the political parties. Then the support at the national level will come since ultimately that will be necessary. But in the beginning some kind of coordination at the state level will be appropriate.

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Till now I do not think that much strength of the poor people has come through voluntary action. But in future it might be necessary and it might take another 8-10 years or something like that because I compare the present poor people's movement with the freedom movement during the course of 90 years. Gandhiji was able to mobilise the people at any time he liked around any issue and he had also to create cadres at the national level and also good unity around him. But now I do not think that are so many groups having unity at the national level on any common issue as at the time of the independence movement.

Unity at the national level is one factor. But what worries me is lack of unity at the level of the group. Many groups are breaking up primarily because of the activists themselves. Only the workers who think that they are indispensable and feel that they are more important than the people are creating these problems in the groups. They are creating another institution and going there. So that will divide any people's movement because these activists are not with the people. They do not let the people grow but take all decisions for them. Hence the group breaking up is not going to affect the people.

Those groups that have not been formed in radical ideology or methodolgy are bound to break sometime or the other because they will make themselves indispensable while those who are involved in people's organisation do not break, but will see that the people's organisation starts.

One last point concerns women and their role in social change and people's movements. Unless they participate whole-heartedly on an equal footing with men, we cannot bring about any change. We can do nothing even at the village level. What I see is that in many places movements are of men. If women participate, they do that on terms set by men. Surely there must be something different. When demanding minimum wages, for example, or protecting forests, unless pressure builds up from women, men alone cannot achieve much. See for example in West Bengal. Men were demanding higher wages and in oder to subdue and punish them, the landlords raped all their women and the men who demanded equality rejected their women after they were raped. Now this type of a violent system can continue if you are not careful. If conscientisation goes properly then I think the people will never underestimate women like that. So by conscientising the male properly they will give proper respect to women.

As for religion, without taking a risk or making any experiment, we can spread some new religion that is not against any old religion and does not ignore it. Actually we achieve nothing by saying that there is no religion but through respect for all. In our programme we hold that God has created everything and he never mentioned that somebody will be rich or poor. Inequalities were never there but were created by man and it is not by God but the people who are using religion for cheating others. They create these divisions. In that way we reinterpret religion but we do not give much importance to any religious thinking.

Action groups and people's movements in India: some false dichotomies (*Rajesh Tandon and Ganesh Pandey*)

The last couple of years have seen an upsurge of a debate on people's movements and the role of action groups in India. Various positions and counter-positions have been articulated in the debate. Some of these positions have created a sense of certain dichotomies. For example, it is said that micro-action lacks macro-perspective; outside activists cannot sustain people's organisations; foreign funds undermine action groups; political parties are essential for a larger political strategy; action without research is misleading; reform activities can undermine revolution. While these issues are important for understanding the nature of the current reality of action groups, it is our view that these are *false* dichotomies. In the following, we briefly take up some of these false dichotomies for further consideration.

It is important to understand that the successful efforts of various action groups in the country have been possible largely due to the gap between the party and the class. Political parties, in particular communist parties, have not been able to organise large sections of the working class: rural poor, women, urban unorganised sectors, etc. This political space created by the inadequacy of the party to understand, educate, mobilise and organise large segments of the working class has provided the major opportunity for action groups to work with this class.

This does not mean that the left political parties have historically played no role. In fact the role of these parties in organising the industrial working class and the rural poor during 1920-1950 is quite significant. Besides, there are a large number of indivi-

duals in these parties, and their various organisations like trade unions, who are genuine and committed, and yet suffocating in the party structure. It is possible for action groups to identify and relate to such individuals at the local and regional levels. Such linkages are necessary to enhance the capability of both to bring about significant transformation of society.

It is true that a larger, national level political support is neces sary for making a significant transformation in the country. Yet, a premature, hurried and top-down imposition of a federation or party can make it impossible. Several efforts to create all-India organisations have yielded little in this direction. Perhaps many of us are so conditioned by the need for a party that we cannot see beyond it. In our view, new forms of associations for solidarity and political support need to be invented instead of rushing towards the announcement of the creation of another party.

Another false dichotomy, partly related to the above, is that between micro action and macro-change. If we closely examine the work of many action groups, we find that many of them succeed in overcoming the exploitation from immediate and local sources like moneylender, landlords, petty officials, etc. But sooner or later they reach a plateau, where action against local, visible oppressors is not possible any more. They come up against the state, and the larger national and international structures of exploitation through remote, distant locations. It is this experience that forces many of the activists to develop a macro-perspective and many begin to feel the need for macro-support.

The essence of this dynamics is that valuable work is being done at the grassroots level, with the oppressed people. By its very nature it is micro in location and content. But it is possible, and many activists and action groups have shown it, to develop a macro-perspective even while working in a micro-area. The beginnings of a struggle are made in a village or a factory, not at the national headquarters or academic institutions. Yet, it is important to continuously struggle to evolve that macro-perspective while engaged in micro-work.

Many action groups are accused of getting so deeply involved in action that they do not realise where they are going. It is then argued that research can guide their work and theory is needed for this purpose. But who shall do the research and who shall provide the theory? Too many times we look to experts, academics and

professionals to do the research and generate theory. This is a false dichotomy. Research and action can go hand in hand. Knowledge is too valuable a commodity to be left to others. Action groups can themselves engage in critical enquiry and research. People, ordinary people, can evolve their own knowledge and theory. This is what Participatory Research is all about—people generating and using their own knowledge for their struggles. Not only that it is possible to do so, it is also being done. And it is critical for the sustenance of a long-term struggle and change process. It is not enough that the experts know what needs to be done. It is also important that people's organisations and action groups also know. And this knowledge is not just based on what they have been told to be true, but what they discover through their own efforts by linking their subjective experiences to objective reality.

Yet this organic linkage between theory and practice is not necassarily maintained in many action groups. Many activists of action groups have developed anti-intellectual and anti-theory attitudes. This has partly happened due to the alienation of intellectuals and undue domination of abstract theoretical formulations. Therefore, action groups need to move towards integration of theory and practice.

It is here that the role of outside activists becomes important. It is true that we are in an oppressive situation because large masses of people are as yet not organised. If such people were already aware, mobilised and organised, the action groups would not have been necessary. Because people are exploited, are poor, weak and ignorant's are not aware, mobilised and organised, we need the stimulation and facilitatation from outsiders. It is in this facilitation, primarily an educational, empowering and organising role, that action groups become the vanguards. It is important to recognise, and many action groups do recognise, that people's own heads, activists and organisations will become the revolutionary force. Action groups are not only heading on behalf of these exploited sections of people, but supporting these people to act on their own behalf also.

It is true that many action groups engage in reform and welfare. It is also true that many of them move beyond reformism. But, the activities of most action groups are by and large labelled as reformist. We have to understand the current situation in this respect.

By revolution, many people imply capture of state power. This is a very narrow difinition of revolution. Changes in attitude, values, life styles, are also important elements of revolution. The work of some action groups has helped to enlarge the definition of revolution. Many of them have focused on the totality of human existence, and not just the mode of production. It is the work of these action groups which has brought health, education, sanitation, drinking water, appropriate technology in agriculture and energy, ecology and forests, children, women's issues, culture religion, social customs and practices, occupational hazards, people's songs, art and music, all into the purview of revolution by acting on these issues. Changes in these various facets of people's life are being attempted by these action groups.

In some quarters, it is considered a counter-revolutionary posture when poor people are encouraged to accept the roles handed down by the state. We have to recognise that the state, in our present context, is not a monolithic set-up. It is engaged in various developmental efforts, in a massive way. Many action groups have been successful in organising the people around the services offered by the state. Similarly, pushing for effective implementation of laws and regulations of the state has been another effective organising vehicle. If a landless family is starving, and the state has a food-for-work programme, is it counter-revolutionary to encourage that family to accept the food for some physical work or building a road? Or if tribal families in a hilly village are suffering from various illnesses due to bad drinking water, is it counter-revolutionary to encourage them to demand and get a tube-well through the state's programme of Supply of Drinking Water?

It appears to us that the reform and revolution dichotomy is patently false in the present context. It is essential that actions that make use of reformist measures but move beyond them towards revolutionary consciousness and organisation of the class may contribute significantly more towards larger societal changes. Yet it is also true that many action groups fail to utilise these reform opportunities for broader purposes of organising the people. To that extent, they get caught in reformism.

Foreign aid is one issue that calls for an open and thorough debate. Many action groups are being made to look like 'untouchables' because they accept external assistance. It is a paradoxical

situation because those who are classifying them as untouchables on this account are not so vocal when the state, the academics and the parties accept foreign aid. In the present situation in India, the government is negotiating foreign aid, it is also well known that academic institutions receive foreign aid, and many trade unions and political parties, including left parties, receive foreign funds. Then why single out action groups for attack?

It is also argued that use of foreign funds by action groups divides them, corrupts them and deviates them from their task. It is true that foreign funds are easily available, that the bureaucratic rigmarole of application and review process is cut down to the minimum in case of most foreign funders. But, funds of all kinds can divide, corrupt and mislead. We have divisions, corruption and misdirection in our political parties, trade unions, academic institutions, government agencies, etc. Some persons in a trade union or government or party are also known to have been corrupted by petty funds coming from union members, government programmes, party members etc. Hence, it is unjustified to attack action groups alone for use of foreign funds. Just as there are examples of lavish life-style and corruption among action groups, there are also examples of genuine, hard working and struggling persons among action groups, including those who receive foreign funds.

An interesting, and at times disheartening, aspect of this attack regarding foreign funds is apparent hypocrisy and confusion about its nature and utilisation. Some accept foreign funds from UN agencies but not from Church bodies; some others consider bilateral agencies like CIDA, NORAD, SIDA etc. 'purer' than private foundations from Europe and North America; still some others get contributions from individuals abroad and consider it 'superior.' There is a certain 'holier-than-thou' attitude attached with various action groups, institutions and individuals on this issue. One group, for example, refuses foreign funds directly, but does not mind if they are routed through an Indian organisation; another accepts foreign funds for travel, research and meetings (much of which supports the work of the group anyway) but not salaries; representatives of another group do not even attend meetings or workshops partially or fully supported by foreign funds, but do not mind accepting an invitation for a conference abroad; some others prefer funds from Indian business houses to any foreign sources.

It is perhaps useful to understand the dynamics of funding in general to clarify some of the misconceptions about foreign funds. Activists working with the oppressed classes, need some funds to support themselves, their families and their work (travel, stationery, etc.). They can either generate these funds from that class or secure them from outside. In the Indian conditions, it is sometimes not so easy to generate them from within the class. An activist working with starving landless families cannot even raise funds for his/her food, let alone for anything else. Even after decades of trade union work, many trade unions working among depressed industry workers (like textiles in Kanpur) are unable to raise enough funds from workers' membership dues to support many full-time activists. Hence, they rely on contributions from outside.

Some contributions, sometimes, can be received from other, somewhat better organised sections of the class (like some trade unions in Bombay are supporting 4-5 activists in rural Maharashtra). But mostly, this support has to be generated from outside the class. Thus it is possible to find financial support within that section of the class the action group is working with. Then it is also possible to raise support from a slightly better-off section of the class. Only then, support should be sought from outside the class.

How are these funds created anyway? If we examine it in classical terms, such funds represent a part of the surplus generated by the labour of the working class. It can come from private Indian foundations or government or the Indian Council for Social Science Research. But the process of the creation of this surplus is the same. And a realistic assessment would show that Indian sources of support are as much a result of the appropriation of this surplus as foreign sources. Hence, when a group or an individual looks for support from outside the class, he or she inevitably dips into this surplus.

Admittedly, there are very many risks and dangers involved in accepting funds from outside the class. The most significant one is being pushed to a compromise of goals and activities by the donor. It is our contention that all action groups, like individuals and institutions who depend on outside finances, be they Indian or foreign, should accept funds in support of their own activity, direction and goals, and not succumb to external pressures from

donors, whoever they may be. And let it be clear that these pressures exist from all donors—be they Indian (business or government) or foreign.

Having said so, we would also like to suggest that there should be a definite preference and move towards finding financial support for activists from within the class, howsoever weak and slow this process may be. But till that class is well-organised (and it is till then mostly that external support is most needed), some dependence on external funds is inevitable. And it is till then that action groups have to be choosy in accepting funds, Indian or foreign, such that they do not compromise their goals, activities and direction.

In the end, we would like to suggest that all is not necessarily well among action groups. Perhaps clubbing them all under one label is also unfair. But it is clear that many of them are moving in a similar direction, though some are more advanced than the others. Many are grappling with these issues themselves, and many more can be encouraged to face such issues. However, we have to guard against the tendency of sectarianism that seems to envelope all of us. Action groups, like other segments of contemporary Indian society, also suffer from sectarianism. It not only divides them, but also divides the movements of the class they are associated with. A major effort needs to be made by all of us towards overcoming the false divisions within the class imposed by caste, language, region, religion, urban, rural, etc. Overcoming sectarianism is the greatest challenge facing action groups and people's movement in India today.

7

Law, Struggle and Change: An Agendum for Activists

Upendra Baxi

The propagation of limits of law

The burgeoining literature on the relations between law and social change celebrates the limits of effective legal action. Much of this literature comes from the First World. The Indian outpourings on the subject thrive on pilfered phrases, pale impersonations of, and borrowed wisdom from, the First World articulations. Lawpersons (and occasionally social scientists) keep on telling lay persons in India that the law cannot lead change but can only follow it, that it cannot be an instrument of basic transformation of values and attitudes and that there are other agents of social charge far more crucial than law. An ideological climate is thus created to devalue the role of law; it then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for all—for the quack and the charlatan as well as for the tyrant. 'Didn't we tell you that law cannot bring about significant social change? Now, you know' they say. 'What is to be done?' They answer: 'Well, don't despair; if human law fails' there is the higher law—the law of *Karma*—which never fails to succeed in its inexorable operation!'

Everyone, including the activists and social action groups (SAG) are thus made to understand the limits of law even before

they understand its potential to foster directed social change. An important task on the agenda of social activists and SAG in contemporary India is to understand how law, *as it exists today*, can be used in favour of the exploited classes and against the dominant ones.

For this to happen, activists and SAG will also have to combat their own internal ideologies which assign the most marginal place to state law. Among the more entrenched people's groups in India are the Gandhian or neo-Gandhian, the Marxist and the liberal ones. The Gandhian or neo-Gandhian group inherit a world view in which the moral integrity of the individual and the collective ethic of a group remain the vital forces for social transformation. Struggle against domination has to be peaceful and punishment for known violation of the law has to be born with dignity. The state law is external to conscience; over-reliance on it is, therefore, against the development of ethical sensibility as a prime mover for social transformation. The 'left-wing' groups, therefore, regard the state law primarily as an instrument of class oppression. By definition, then, an activist assertion cannot rely on state law and its processes. To do so will be to enhance the legitimacy of the state and its law which must be challenged and exposed by social action. The purest form of radical groups' approach to state and the law is, perhaps, to be found in Naxalite 'jurisprudence' which believes in the creation of alternate legality (people's courts, public executions of the 'enemies of the people,' terror as distinct from structured coercion as the basis of legitimation of a new polity) and in the annihilation of state law and its agencies and agents.

In contrast, the liberal groups whose presence is now growing, believe in sustained or episodic and opportunistic strategic uses of the law. The liberal NGOs believing in sustained uses of law are marked by their metropolitan leadership and decision-making locations and by high presence of NGIs (non-governmental individuals) such as academics, lawyers, retired justices and administrators. Other liberal groups not having metropolitan location and 'intellectual' leadership are in the habit of activating law (mostly courts) when they can or when they must. But for those operating at the grassroots, access to the law, the aftermath of its activation, and the future impact of the use of law on their leadership and organisation continue to present rather constant themes for agonising in their struggle.

As the reader would realise, this classification of activists and groups is by way of ideal types; in real life one finds mixed types. One also notices tendencies towards transition, in real life, from one category to another. For example, the essentially Gandhian oriented organisation of the rural poor (like the *Rangpur Ashram* led by Harivallabh Parekh or the *Chipko* Movement) have become 'liberal' at least in so far as their approach to the law is concerned; and left-oriented groups do use the courts rather effectively (e.g. the Lawyers' Collective or the PUDR). But the essential ideology concerning the role of the law in social transformation is not drastically changed in the process; the law is only used tactically and strategically, while the overall negation of the law remains latent as the basic theoretical approach.

The rule of law and the reign of terror

Activists and groups encounter law typically at its repressive worst; they internalise thus the fact that law is the negation of freedom and justice and the very embodiment of arbitrariness and cruelty. More concretely, the law to the poor meanssu ffering the lawlessness or the agents and institutions of the state and of law. I may be arrested without any reasonable ground for suspicion, handcuffed or roped like an animal and taken to the police station without a word of explanation, locked up, beaten and sadistically tortured at the whim of the captors, produced before the magistrate at the will of the captors, put in jail without years on end, and without judicial proceedings even beginning, made to slave in jail without wages and if young, bartered for homosexual relations. Or, my wife and daughter may be raped, my hut set ablaze, my small belongings looted or destroyed by the militia of the landlords or para-military forces of the state. Or, still, I might be shot dead in 'encounters' and posthumously proclaimed as 'dacoit', 'extremist' or 'Naxal'

This is clearly a part of the reality of the state law. The law may create, in Karl Marx's words, 'circumstances of reckless terrorism' and display a 'purely *policemaniac character* in dealing with the subjugated 'classes' (Baxi forthcoming). When the state law assumes a *policemaniac* character, it also manifests the tendency of the state towards lawlessness. The normative law of the state prohibits standardless use of force; reign of terror is nothing

but that. Terror, therefore, involves organised illegality by state agents. In this sense, the state is inherently lawless. Or to put it in another way, 'every state is organised as a single functional order of legality and illegality' (Poulantzas, forthcoming). There is thus no way of saying that *law does not exist as a reign of terror*.

At the same time, law also exists *as the rule of law; this* reality could not also be denied. It is this ideology which provides the principle that distinguishes between the lawful and the unlawful uses of force and enables us to distinguish 'terror' from 'legitimate force.' It is the rule of law ideology which prescribes that wherever there is power there is accountability: that the two cannot be divorced. It is this ideology which campaigns against arbitrary exercise of state power and gives us values such as formal and substantive equality and freedom. Not merely this. It provides an ensemble of structures and institutions within which these precepts could be continually elaborated entrenched and enforced *against the state*.

The state law is thus a contradictory social reality. It is, on Marxian analysis, the very task of the rule of law ideology to mask the reign of terror. But terroristic repression cannot be masked as far as the immediate victims of repression are concerned. Nor can it be masked for those who struggle on behalf of the victims. In any case, unmasking is only possible if the rule of law ideology exists in the first place. Where it does not exist, bullets (on both sides) are the only argument. You do not invoke reasoned arguments appealing to standards of justice in the face of regimes of terror like those of Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin or Papa 'Doc'; to be an activist in such regimes is also to be a terrorist and the best strategy is what medievalists called 'tyrannicide' and modern wisdom describes as 'coup.'

In societies like India, at the present stage, what we have is a *co-presence* of terror with the ideology of the rule of law. In such a situation, the state law can be as effectively used to expose the state's lawless terror. It can also be used to combat repression. It may be relatively harder for people's groups to wield the rule of law ideology as effectively for emancipation as it is used by the dominant groups for repression. But it is possible to use and enhance the liberational profile and content of the law, as legislation, adjudication and administration. The state law provides

ideologies, institutions and structures which can be effectively used for domination as well as struggles against domination.

Some experiences of the liberational uses of state law

Many PORP (Participatory Organisations of the Rural Poor), ORP (Organisations of the Rural Poor) and SAG (Social Action Groups)[1] encounter, in the early phase of their organisation and action, a disproportion between their knowledge of the repressive procedures and contents of state law and the liberative contents of the state law. They have sure knowledge of the varieties of repressive experience that the state law promises and provides, but little information about the liberational potential of the self same state law. This cognitive gap is *not* accidental. It is structured in the very mode of production of the state law. The mode

[1]The people's groups have been classified into these three categories for the sake of convenience, rather than out of any theoretical mischief! The key distinction here is between ORP and PORP—ORP do not adopt participation as a principle of organisation; PORP do precisely this. Among the ORP we include a whole variety of groups—party-based cadres, non-party developmental groups (e.g., Rangpur, Chipko, Tilonia); specific constituency groups (e.g., environmental groups, women's organisations, caste upliftment associations); mobilisation groups (e.g., *Chhattra Vahinis*); task-oriented service groups *Jyoti* (*Sanghi*, Sanjeevini; Nari Rakshasamitis or anti-dowry groups). PORP include participatory ORP like the *Bhoomi Sena* and *Kastakari Sangathana*.

SAG present a wide variety of activities. Essentially SAG are linkage and service groups; they are designed to assist ORP and PORP in normal times as well as in distress. Mostly, they are city-based, and managed by members of ideological professions including the social science establishment. They seek to comprehend ORP and PORP through dialogical research. SAG seek to serve ORP and PORP by:

(a) helping communication and coordination among diverse groups, within the region and across the nation;
(b) creating and mobilising upward linkages of power and influence in support of ORP and PORP;
(c) providing orientation and reflection, and self-correction mechanisms, to ORP and PORP; and
(d) providing specialised services and skills like legal services.

The SAG category would include entities such as PIDT (People's Institute of Development and Training); Lokayan; Rajpipla Free Legal Services Programmes; CERC (Consumer Education and Research Centre); Gandhi Peace Foundation, ASSALT (Association for Social Action and Legal Thought); PUDR; and PUCL.

of production of the state law *determines* the level of legal illiteracy and ignorance. The state law is so produced that its beneficiaries may have the weakest prospect of knowing about it. This applies not just to the legislative law but also to judge-made law. The fact remains that legal ignorance is *created* and *sustained* as a systemic level by the legal system itself. This problem is not merely of communication of the law as the literature on mobilisation of law might suggest; it is a problem of the structure of the state law itself.

Be that as it may, groups of and for the rural poor often cannot use the law as a resource to combat excesses of power because of the well-nurtured incidence of legal ignorance. But when this ignorance is removed, howsoever slightly, the groups gain strength which they did not previously have.

The knowledge, that the crop protection society militia maintained by the landlords, is not equivalent to state police has proved useful, and even important, to the *Kastakari Sangathana*. ORP dealing with the landless poor often find it exceedingly useful in their struggle with landlords for just wages, to know the precise rates of minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act. The *Chipko* Movement was helped with information about the limits of power by the forest and revenue bureaucracy to award licenses for the felling of trees. Information about debt-relief legislation enabled *adivasis* of Rangpur villages to accomplish massive scaling of debts and to even seek their cancellation. Information about impending introduction of a forest bill in India which created a very large variety of forest offences, including those of unauthorised removal of grass and leaves, has already enabled concerned groups to energise successfully the public opinion of a large number of *adivasis* throughout the country.

Undoubtedly, access to legal information diminishes, to some or other extent, the vulnerability of the poor to exploitation or manipulation. It does also introduce possibilities of change in power relations between the people and their adversaries. Further, it assists the processes of self-reliance and self-assertion considerably.

But access to legal information can have other benign impacts on the internal structure and function of the people's groups themselves. The internal constitution of a people's group may, at times, be assisted by the models of organisation provided by the state law. For example, it provides a variety of organisational

forms such as credit cooperatives, registered societies, trusts, trade unions, companies and partnerships. Most people's organisations tend to operate outside these organisational models; in a sense, they do not exist as entities in the eye of the state law. But often this happens because ORP have no real information on the relative merits of alternate organisational forms under the state law.

The point about these models is that they provide the accumulation of legal experience for structuring associational or group activities. What is more these models provide essentially facilitative, non-coercive, legal arrangements; and they provide a wide range of choice. It goes without saying that any ORP needs some norms for internal structures, and functional spontaneity is just not enough. There arises need for certain, tacit or explicit, norms governing decision-making, allocations of tasks and benefits, management of affairs, recruitment and training of cadres and personnel, and accountability of active leaders to the rank and file. Not merely do the ORP need to have an internal constitution, they have also to be imbued with their own distinctive spirit of constitutionalism.

This way of expressing the need for internal constitution for ORP, of course, states the matter too formally; but it indicates at least the broad range of problems arising for ORP, PORP and SAG. Sooner or later, at some point of their development, a choice is made of a legal form. Some SAG start with an explicit choice (e.g., SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Organisation, or PIDT. The former is a trade union registered under the law while the latter is a registered society). Some ORP and PORP who defer these choices find themselves later in a situation requiring a choice (e.g., *Bhoomi Sena* in its dynamic relations with the *Tarun Mandal*). Sometimes, the need for choice arises out of the nature of the enterprise preferred by an ORP. For example, when an ORP decides to sell its produce not to the local trader who offers a low price but to an outside trader. This marketing arrangement may entail a common fund which has to be administered to everyone's satisfaction and benefit. Appropriate information concerning the range of legal forms which facilitates ORP is indeed vital.

Aside from this *constitutive* role of legal information, we may also find that information about the state law may often help ORP to fashion more effective strategies for attainment over a

period of time, of social change objectives. If the state law imposes prohibition on reckless felling of trees, or pollution of environment or provides for free and compulsory education of children, or family planning, the ORP, following the same objectives can attain several concrete results by using these information packages. First, they can resist delegitimation from adversaries by stressing the commonality of the developmental objectives. Second, they can negotiate bureaucratic contingencies more effectively (e.g., from obtaining major resource allocation decisions in their favour to even getting support for seemingly small steps as use of a public place in a village for a night school for landless labourers, and getting priority quota for kerosene lamps for this purpose from public distribution systems). Third, ORP can by reference to the commonality with the national objectives embodied in the state law, add to their capabilities to withstand repression. Fourth, ORP can also thereby obtain political space and time—both valuable resources in themselves—needed for their growth and viability. Last, but not the least, insofar as ORP are funded, especially from overseas, they need to have a legal habitation (a bank account, at the very least!) and a name; and this process is facilitated by invocation of commonality.

The question of effective access to law is vital to people's groups. But it is, and it should not be, regarded as merely a problem of information. The problem of information is also one of power and domination. People's groups have to consider alternatives to the present mode of production of the state law, including participative law making, interpretation and enforcement. Episodic liberational uses of the law will relate primarily to the problem of access. Sustained liberational strategies will question, and delegitimate, the systemic creation of legal ignorance.

Recourse to law or to direct action

The ORP's legal consciousness will also determine the range of uses of law which may be imaginatively built into social action as well as cadre building and training programmes. If the ORP are opportunistic and casual law users, the liberational potential of the law is likely to be overlooked. This may happen in a variety of important ways.

The ORP may overlook the choices made available by the

legal system in planning its strategies. The system might provide a simple and effective remedy through court activation (say an injunction) as against a prolonged and taxing campaign of direct action or civil disobedience. Of course, recourse to courts tends usually to depoliticise consciousness which it is the primary aim of direct action to foster. But direct action strategies, if consistently overused, make demands on the leaders and the led which might eventually make such direct action counter-productive. Most ORP have not been able to evolve the right mix of recourse to law and direct action. To that extent either they have been ineffective in some of their campaigns or they have achieved success at high costs of enervation. Fasting up to death, *gherao* (which literally means encirclement of the adversary till a decision is revised), picketing, processions and marches, involve gains of mobilisation, participation, publicity and politicisation. On the other hand, they also might involve considerable leadership and economic costs. Direct action modalities may also occasionally involve survival costs (as when police use riot control methods and even shoot-at-sight), freedom costs (as when large numbers of people are arrested and detained), and dignity costs.

The gains of successful direct action campaigns are, of course, always impressive; but when it fails, its costs appear no less striking. And overuse of its strategies may so routinise direct action as to deprive it of its symbolic mass protest value; they indeed become political rituals which hard-nosed administrators regard as being no more than routine order of business (in terms of response or repression) at best or as occupational hazards at worst.

ORP do not frequently realise that direct action is made possible only because the legal system provides for free expression of dissent through organised public gestures. If the law and polity did not tolerate collective peaceful protest and was inhospitable to even the most innocuous expression of organised public opinion, people's groups would be deprived even of this much political space.

If this is fully grasped, the choice of strategies between direct action and law recourse is not between legal and non-legal action. Both are law-related actions. Both have their manifest and latent costs and gains. Both involve exercises in political rationality. The antithesis is not really between direct action and recourse to courts; it is rather between an effective and ineffective strategy in certain specific contexts.

Of course, it may be extremely difficult for most ORP to identify certain problems as those which may be met by simple recourse to law. The poor typically fail to identify their problems as distinctively legal and indeed not many could really be so identified. This understandably gets carried over to organisations of the rural poor. But alternate legal modes of action do enhance the capabilities of ORP, and ways have to be found to carry this message to them.

Legal activism and social action litigation

Access to information is only a part of the story: access to favoured interpretation of state law by the ORP and PORP is another. And access to interpretation, pre-eminently by recourse to courts and tribunals, is also a form of domination and power. In a sense, the power to interpret laws is the power to make them; and the power to manipulate the interpretation process is also the power to make law. But the interpreters and manipulators of interpretation, lawyers and judges, are themselves not easily accessible to the poor or the ORP. Part of the reason for their non-availability is, of course, the class character of the legal profession and the judiciary. But a part of the explanation lies also in the fact that the poor and the ORP do not provide any systematic input of their problems in the court system in a proactive manner. And the reason for this lies in the divergent legal consciousness of the ORP and PORP! Once again through this vicious circle the people's groups lose whatever opportunities they have of activating the liberational potential of the state legal system.

This vicious circle can only be broken by the initiative of legal SAG. Unless legal activists emerge, the gulf between courts and poor must remain almost the same. And the emergence of legal activists, whether academics, lawyers or judges, is itself problematic and contingent. India has witnessed its first real upsurge of legal activism (including even among justices of the Supreme Court) only in the past four years. This can be explained by the catharsis of middle and upper middle classes, and their slight radicalisation, in the wake of and upon the cessation of the internal Emergency in 1977 and the tumultuous populism of the Janata Years and the return of Indira Gandhi. While it describes

certain historical processes, even the above statement does not furnish a full explanation of the emergence of legal activism.

But it is true that social action litigation[2] in India has emerged through uncoordinated use of law by scattered legal activists in the universities, the bar, the bench and the media. The following episodic review indicates the range and scope of present development:

(a) Four law professors issued an open letter to the Chief Justice of India sharply criticising its decision acquitting police constables accused of committing rape of tribal woman within the confines of a police station, on the specious ground that because she did not resist she must have consented to sexual intercourse. This created a nationwide controversy, led swiftly to a bill proposing an amendment of the criminal law relating to rape, and a protest march by women's organisations to the Supreme Court seeking a review of the decision.

(b) The Supreme Court of India, acting on complaints by or on behalf of prisoners, has revolutionised, normatively at least, prison jurisprudence (Baxi 1980; Baxi 1982).

(c) Journalists have sought intervention of the Court to prevent the buying and selling of women (the Kamala case), the torture of Naxalites in Madras jails, the importation for carnal use of children in a Kanpur prison, and seeking full investigation into extra-judicial investigation of police 'encounters' with dacoits resulting in extra-judicial executions of people in the rural areas of Indian states.

(d) Public-spirited lawyers have questioned with remarkable success the long incarceration of people awaiting trial for crimes carrying maximum sentences often under half the period of pre-trial detention already served.

(e) A Bombay-based lawyer group has persuaded the Supreme Court to admit a petition claiming that pavement dwellers in Bombay have a fundamental right under the Constitution to dwell on pavements and has filed a writ claiming access to clean and hygienic drinking water for villagers in Maharashtra.

2. See for reasons to avoiding American label 'Public Interest Litigation' (Baxi 1977).

(f) An agonised Supreme Court is proceeding to fix culpability for the blinding of undertrials in Bihar and has ordered a number of compensatory measures.
(g) Two law professors have filed writ proceedings for violation of constitutional rights of women detained in a protective home for women in Agra and for cruel and sadistic torture of eleven young persons in Madhya Pradesh jails.
(h) A legal sociologist has successfully moved the Court to secure expeditious trial of four boys under detention for seven to eight years for a crime they did not commit!

The Supreme Court has also assumed an activist role. It has developed a simple and swift technique of what must be called 'epistolary.' SAG and *bona fide* public citizens may simply write a letter to a judge of the Supreme Court or High Court concerning excesses of public power against the deprived and the dispossessed and the Court will treat it as a writ petition. The rules on *locus standi* have been radically liberalised to allow this and associated forms of action. The Supreme Court and the High Courts have appointed socio-legal commissions of enquiry to ascertain facts. Courts have assumed *suo motu* jurisdiction also to review lawless use of force by agents of the state. Compensation for violation of fundamental rights is now emerging as a new constitutional principle. The lawlessness of the state stands massively exposed and indicted.

For the first time, India has a National Committee on the Implementation of Legal Aid Programmes (as distinct from committees on legal aid which produce excellent blueprints of what needs to be done). Aside from the routine dispensation of legal services through state boards, the committee has started a unique programme of legal aid camps. These camps are held in rural areas where specific collective complaints of the rural poor are attended to in the presence of Supreme Court and High Court judges, district judiciary, administration and police. Some of these camps have been held at the request of the ORP.

This is an unprecedented and remarkable development quite likely to survive the reactionary onslaughts against it by those who were accustomed to the use of judicial process only by the privileged few to protect *their* interests and values. The future of social action litigation is indeed quite bright. Already many ORP

have begun to realise the potentialities of the liberational uses of law, and not a week passes without at least one group trying to reach out to legal activists for initiation of social action litigation on behalf of the poor.

Social action litigation: prospects and limits

Among the gains of social action litigation are: the heightened sensitivities to injustice on the part of a cross-section of the elite, increasingly insistent claims for accountability of the ruling classes and dominant political institutions, a gradual, pro-people renovation of judicial process and values, emergence of a special kind of confidence in the judiciary in its unequal battle with administrative deviance, and crystallisation of informed consensus on the need for fundamental reform of the legal system. Given the unplanned efforts of a few individual legal activists, with shoestring budgets and poor infrastructural facilities, these achievements are indeed astonishing.

But even as we celebrate these achievements, we must stress the inherent limitations of social action litigation. The identification of many of these limitations may be premature as considerable social research is necessary to identify the characteristics of legal activists: their growing linkages with ORP and PORP, the effectiveness of court recourse both in terms of redistribution of resources and of ameliorating the repressive core of the law. The limits delineated here may well be seen as hypotheses on the research agenda of this new mode of activating the liberational potential of law through courts.

First, we must note that courts may not reverberate with such populism, every time and everywhere. Even the Indian experience is somewhat unique in terms of the history of adjudication in the country. But it highlights the fact that just judges everywhere are sensitive human beings and they can be made to understand and appreciate the repressive potential and reality of the law, and they can be converted into crucial resources for legal mobilisation.

Second, we have to acknowledge that court recourse means depoliticisation of the problem. Sooner or later, the invocation of the jurisdiction of courts means that we professionalise conflicts. The bonded labourers may be freed by a judicial order but the social meaning of liberation, and its political message for the structure of power relations, may well be lost.

Professionalisation of conflicts (by hiring intermediaries—lawyers—for advocacy and by its translation of issues of concrete material interests in conflict into issues of interpretation of abstract legal norms) may deprive self-reliant PORP and ORP of their vitality on certain issues. They may not merely lose control over the range of probable choices for action but also acquire characteristics of *dependency* of vassalage to alien organisations designed to serve, or primarily serving the dominant interests. The implications of such dependency need pondering. ORP and PORP thus have choices to make. They could, for example, fight certain forms of dependencies with *other* forms of dependencies! In other words, the choice may be made between *political* dependency (for insulation and protection from terror, force and lawlessness of the state law) and *professional* dependency. Some dependency on the very political and legal superstructure which legitimises exploitation of the poor is historically inevitable in a non-revolutionary strategy of social change through voluntaristic community action. The choice relates not to the *factum* of dependency but rather its *forms*.

There is much to commend strategies of professionalisation of conflict, and thereby dependency on courts and judges, in regard to the *repressive realities of the law*. Most people's groupings are not, given the configurations of the political economy, likely to be able to combat the repressive essence of state law and order, without involving significantly, judges and courts. It is no accident that much of social action litigation before the Supreme Court of India has, in its essence, the plea for the activation of judicial power to diminish the repression through the law, especially the reign of terror.

Third, even when we activate judicial power to combat legal repression, we may acknowledge constantly that the limits of social action litigation are the very limits of law and legal action. Such action removes constraints on liberty by eliminating repression; but it does not provide conditions which would make the restoration of liberty meaningful. Persons detained over ten years or more, awaiting trial, may be set free, but how can legal activists help them to stand on their feet after all the enormous disadvantages attendant upon incarceration? Bonded labourers may be freed from debt bondage but what can social and legal activists do to help them realise the full meaning of their liberation?

To what extent can courts be asked to fashion lasting and meaningful measures of relief that would add meaning to the endowment of freedom? How far may courts compel the state to concretely atone for lawlessness of the law? How do courts and legal activists monitor institutional reforms compelled by social action litigation? How can one structurally lessen, through judicial intervention, administrative deviance and governmental lawlessness? How does one overcome the bureaucratic contingencies involved in realising the full ameliorative import of such measures of relief and rehabilitation as courts may be persuaded to grant?

To raise at random some of these problems is to raise again the problem of the legal consciousness of the PORP, ORP and SAG. Unless they develop a *systemic* interest in the state law and *campaign* as a part of their action for emancipation of the poor for, e.g.,

(a) reform of the administration of justice;
(b) increase in the strength of judges and level of their social commitment;
(c) reorganisation of the colonial police force into a democratic people's police force;
(d) effective prosecutorial staff and practices;
(e) simplicity and clarity in legal drafting and greater participation of people's groups in the drafting process.
(f) humanisation of penal and correctional institutions;
(g) greater social accountability of the legal profession; and
(h) effective participative procedures for law reform; and right to access to information,

massive invocation of the social action jurisdiction will lead to a dynamic of disenchantment in the coming years. This will happen because the underlying structure of legal institutions and processes will remain unaffected by social action litigation and very few PORP, ORP and SAG will have the capabilities to back up and oversee the implementation of judicial directives. Social action litigation will then begin to be perceived (it has begun so to be perceived even by a leading social and legal activist as Vasudha Dhagamwar) to be only a *symbolic* leverage for a more just and responsive social order. Unless the liberational potential of the law is enhanced *as a part of the struggle* for emancipation

of the poor,[3] the repressive reality will continue to haunt them with all its diabolical force. Herein lies the challenge of law to social action.

[3]See, for an agenda of action, Baxi, (1982) *Crisis of the Indian Legal System* arrogantly and ignorantly dismissed by K. Mahajan in a review in *Social Action*, 31 (n. 31, July-September 1981), pp. 364-65.

Reactions from Scholar Activists

8

Activist Groups: Fundamental Issues

Ajit Roy

If the Seventies were remarkable for the proliferation of the activist groups, the decade of the Eighties is so for the growth of literature on their role, problems and prospects. This is natural as the second is a reflection of the richness, variety and, in a sense, vitality of the first. Though this large body of publications contributes to the illumination of the multifarious aspects of the phenomenon and the perceptions of its numerous participants and observers, there is, however, a certain repetitiveness in most of the writings, which tends to suggest that the discussions—wide ranging though they are—have become confined to certain familiar grooves. This again is the reflection of an objective reality, namely, that having passed through various stages of evolution, the action groups are now themselves caught in a web of stagnation.

In a way, the situation in India is relatively better in this regard than in most developed capitalist countries where many of the action groups that had sprung up in the late Sixties or early Seventies have by now disintegrated. While it would be interesting and instructive to examine the somewhat different out-turn of broadly similar social processes in varying socio-political environments, the exercise has to be deferred in the interest of a sharper focus on a more narrowly defined problematic.

The various issues discussed in different contributions here, naturally do not all belong to the same level as some of them relate to the fundamental questions of the nature, role and objectives of the action groups and some others to their principles of organisation, modes of operation, inter-relations among the action groups as well as between them and the Leftist, primarily Communist, parties and so on. Answers to most of the questions at the second level would really depend on the positions taken on the first set of fundamental questions. Besides, the second set of questions can be properly tackled only on the basis of close personal acquaintance with the functioning of the action groups, which this writer cannot honestly claim to possess. The following paragraphs, therefore, attempt only at reflecting on the first set of problems, accompanied by only some broad observations on some of the secondary questions.

To come to the substance of the discussion, the following excerpts from the papers referred to above, serve to give a good introduction to the perceived role and planned objectives of the action groups. The action groups

> enter into the life reality of the poor and the oppressed, and have attempted to raise the voice of the voiceless . . .
>
> Action groups are part of a wider movement in search of new forms of social and political action through which the masses of the people would move from the periphery to the centre of development and political processes. It had become increasingly evident that political parties were not achieving this . . . (H. Volken)
>
> (Action groups) attempt to tilt the balance of power in favour of the marginalised sections of society . . . empowering the powerless . . . through people's participation in their own development . . . as the marginalised taking control over their lives and decision making . . . or as a non-party political process. . . . (Walter Fernandes).
>
> (The action groups) were exposed to the broader socio-economic political reality of the country and were quite wary of the superficial politics of all the established parties. Despite their being under the influence of different ideologies, all of them were dissatisfied with the existing state of affairs and wanted radical change in the situation. Moreover, they implicitly believed that to change the existing socio-economic reality in the real sense, social action had to begin at the micro-level. (Dinanath Monohar).
>
> Political parties, in particular communist parties have not been

> able to organise large sections of the working class: rural poor, women, urban unorganised sectors, etc. This political space created by the inadequacy of the party to understand, educate, mobilise and organise large segments of the working class has provided the major opportunity for action groups to work with this class (Rajesh Tandon and Ganesh Pandey).

Although there are many shades of difference in focus and emphasis, there is however a broad agreement on some of the key issues of characterisation and objectives of the action groups among the opinions cited above.

For instance all the commentators fully agree about the political nature, role and objective of the action groups. This should mean that we need not deal here with those action groups who do not explicitly profess any political objective, although that should not mean that they are really non-political in their objective pursuit.

The second major agreement among the viewpoints cited above is the action groups' preferred preoccupation with the marginalised masses. None of the commentators cited above, except for Tandon and Pandey, ever mentions work among the industrial workers as part of the action groups' sphere of work and interest.

Thirdly, they are all in agreement not only on the failure and inadequacy of the Left (Communist) parties, but also apparently on the need for and possibility of supplanting them with chains of action groups, may be with some type of inter-relation and coordination among them.

Fourthly, concerned with the role and functions of isolated action groups as they are, the commentators, some of them explicitly and some others implicitly, suppose that improved performance at micro-level, i.e., adequate to meet the challenge of the developing situation, is not only possible for the isolated groups to achieve (with, of course, some sort of solidarity and support from other forces, but without really being an organic part of a very much wider entity). They also suppose that they would thereby be enabled to fulfil the historic responsibility of bringing about a radical social restructuring.

It would appear that although speaking in Leftist and radical idioms, the proponents of the above-mentioned views either do not fully understand or accept the theory of class struggle in all its implications. The preoccupation with the 'marginalised', 'powerless', 'oppressed, 'voiceless', etc., is useful and productive only

when it is linked up with and subordinated to the organised struggle of the industrial and agricultural workers.

Sixthly, objectives like raising 'the voice of the voiceless', moving 'from the periphery to the centre of development and political processes,' taking control over their lives and decision making' and so on are little more than fine sounding radical phrases unless they are viewed as part of the struggle for overthrowing the class society and moving forward to classless, i.e., socialist society.

And finally, whatever the failures and inadequacies of the existing parties, the overthrow of a highly centralised political power, safeguarding the iniquitous society, cannot be achieved without centralised leadership, i.e., party. The task, therefore, is not to bypass the political parties, but to work for creating an adequate party—a task that needs a lot of revolutionary experience historically accumulated in the course of long struggles.

The foregoing analysis leads to the conclusion that the politically oriented action groups have first to define their objectives in more precise terms and then resolve the contradictions that would surface between the objectives so defined and their methods of work.

In the context, it is necessary to question some of the premises on which the existing perspectives of the action groups are based, as for instance, the view that the Communist movement in India has historically neglected the peasantry in general and the agricultural workers, *dalits* and the tribal population in particular. Without denying many serious weaknesses that persist in these areas, one still holds that any serious study of Indian political evolution during the last six decades would reveal that the Communist contributions in these spheres are far from negligible and many times more than what has been achieved by thousands of action groups during the last decade or so.

Similarly, the idea that the Communist parties seek to perpetuate their leadership over the masses by suppressing the initiatives of the latter is also false. Though this is not the place to deal with this question thoroughly, the following lines from a study of the trade union movement in Bombay during the twenties can help a proper assessment.

> The 'Workers and Peasants' Party (a front organisation created by the Indian communists in the middle twenties) gave special encouragement to branch meetings of union members in

> the hope that ordinary workers would create their own leadership and train themselves in self-government by taking their own decisions and keeping their own records and accounts (Newman 1981: 110).

To touch briefly on the practical problems of organisation and work in conclusion, there cannot be any general principle on these issues. They have to be decided on merit in each specific case. To take the most debated question of foreign funds for instance, there is nothing objectionable in principle in accepting them, for, (i) while some foreign funding agencies may indeed have some devious aim, there are also some genuinely progressive agencies, (ii) there is no objection even to using funds from reactionary sources for progressive causes and indeed it is one of the major tasks of progressive mass organisations to use funds provided by the reactionary official agencies which the latter intend for either containing mass disaffection or creating illusions among the people. But while accepting foreign funds, the action groups have to see that they are not used to curb their radical activities and they should not get totally dependent on these sources of funding. Most important, the easy flow of foreign funds should not be allowed to corrupt the activists and they must guard against using this money for their own comfortable living.

9

Confessions of a Non-Aligned Activist

Bunker Roy

Much of what I am going to write is already contained in an article I wrote for *Seminar* (November 1983). Henry Volken in his piece on *Action Groups: Beginning or End of a Dream*—has mentioned it in passing. It will not be anything new; my views are well known and they have generated a great deal of heat among action groups. Perhaps it is because they cannot fit me into any slot or identify me with any ideology or label or brand me suitably. This makes me an unknown devil and that is enough, I find, to attract criticism from action groups, self-styled activists and budding (also budded) politicians. If at all this keeps the dialogue alive and ticking with no question of it being resolved where we agree to disagree and we part company bruised—but still friends. Respecting other people's views is a sign of maturity that I expect from others but there is a degree of tolerance that is missing in such debates.

Having said this let us start from the level where there seems to be the most confusion and misunderstanding: the level of the village where the buck stops and where you have no choice but to act. As Nalini Nayak says, Action Groups basically concentrate on action. Whether that is good or bad for action groups we can discuss that later but after reading Walter Fernandes'

article on *Some Dilemmas Facing Action Groups: Reactions from Activists*, I was somewhat disappointed. We should have left the field open instead of putting leading questions and cramping their style. The bias behind most of the questions—that outsiders and participatory researchers have a role to play—could have been put more subtly. But what was most disturbing of all was an absence of a language of their own. I was looking forward to reading something distinct, original, perhaps the same idea expressed in a different manner but intensely reflecting the unique experience they have gone through that no one—other activists, arm chair revolutionaries, action groups, has been theoreticians and participatory researchers—no one can express better than in his own language, his own style, his own words and it is for the others to make sense out of it. It was obvious from the beginning someone had got to them and influenced (not destroyed) their spontaneity and this is where I agree with Walter Fernandes in his earlier article *External Support for Action Groups* when he says, 'the intervention of outsiders in local action can end up in preventing the growth of the people rather than supporting it.'

Some interesting issues have been raised on which I would like to share my point of view. They will be different not because I want to be different but because my experience has been on a lesser and more mundane level like Nimai Bhai's or Jagdish Pradhan's in Orissa. But in my own way without people whispering in my ear, I have thought these issues out—like other action groups—though I may have the advantage of being able to express myself more clearly.

Mahatma Gandhi's last man today is no longer alone. He is in fact the most Wanted Man and ostensibly the ultimate beneficiary of a bewildering variety of schemes and programmes of the Government of India and of action groups in the voluntary sector. He is being pulled and twisted and pinched and blackmailed and corrupted by us educated people who I consider to be the biggest threat to rural development. The idea is to make him aware of his rights and make him stand on his own two feet and not depend on anyone. We say do not underestimate him, he is sharp, he is shrewd, he has knowledge and he has skill and he knows precisely how to extract the maximum from the system. This may be true but I cannot help feeling this is the *Last*

But One Man. The condition of the Last Man is still the same and on his behalf we are taking so many things for granted.

He does not know how to read and write. He has never heard of the Constitution and all this talk of rights and duties is stuff and nonsense. He has never been in a position where he has not been exploited so if we should say he is exploited he does not know what you are talking about. He has never lived free from hunger or fear. He finds security in being exploited—at least he gets meals and shelter. He could not care less about foreign aid and whether it is Chinese, American, Russian or Indian money, it really does not matter. His spine was broken long ago and self-respect, dignity and self-reliance are luxuries he can ill afford. He is not allowed to take decisions on his own because he is repaying debts and favours in kind and labour. He identifies political parties with flesh and blood individuals who keep him alive, who help him in times of trouble, who give him money when he needs it and for that the last man allows himself to be used and abused. He only trusts the man who exploits him the most because alternatives have proved expensive for him. Usually the man who exploits him is a person of his own caste. This is the bottom line.

Presumably the questions Walter Fernandes asked the action groups, were directed towards resolving some of the *internal* dilemmas of action groups and whether clarity on such issues would help them cope with the external situation better. Because on the face of it they are non-issues. Irrelevant, most of them to my mind. Let's select the ones which apparently worry the action groups the most.

People's organisations

Stray observations right through all the articles I can pick up really a basic lack of focus: 'people's organisations which have gained the greatest internal strength are those in whose development the least amount of outside finances have been utilised (Volken) . . . the real problem of security (among action group members) is primarily determined by the quality of relationship with the people (Volken) . . . we underestimate the strength of the people and that is bad (Pradhan) . . . by activating the people they succeeded in bringing changes in the concrete(?) relationships between the oppressed and their oppressors (Manohar).

Which people?

If it is the sort of people living a hand to mouth existence then the very issue of people's organisation is premature. Action groups that have gone on without three square meals a day can fall back on their faith, beliefs, commitment, ideology and connections and even that in many cases is not enough. Many opt for security and missing meals or living indecently/simply is not quite so secondary. Groups splinter into smaller groups because mini and maxi-gods have failed to support them in times of crisis, because they do not have the consistency or staying power and have much to learn about the art of survival from the very people they are trying to mobilise. Pradhan is right when he says, "... not much strength of the poor people has come through voluntary action." In the final analysis the rural poor are on their own and we are no one to prod and poke them into any direction to keep ourselves ideologically alive. We can only create an environment before they finally decide for themselves. But there are transition stages that cannot be avoided and we should enter such stages with our eyes open:

(i) *Funds:* Any aid that comes into a depressed or backward area is foreign. If we tie ourselves up into knots and start drawing imaginary lines based on 'principles' we are not going to get anywhere. It entirely depends on your attitude and how far you are prepared to be honest with yourself. Henry Volken uses 'foreign funds' for MOTT but they are doing such a marvellous job so what's the problem? Government funds are 'foreign' and they are being misused by a *patwari* or a *thanadar* and also by action groups in many cases. Using foreign funds to further a cause, fight an evil, pressurise the system or set an example to my mind is justified. Foreign can be government, a donor agency overseas or commerce and industry. But action groups need funds to create this environment to develop confidence, to give the rural poor a feeling of security that they can speak their mind and share their problems. The agency must be economically strong (which should not be mistaken for security) to battle formidable forces in the area. To develop people in backward areas an alternative infrastructure entirely non-institutional in nature needs to be developed. Funds are required from outside the area: that makes it foreign.

(ii) *Dependency:* Another hang up with action groups or of

those who advise, guide, promote, assist, train and support action groups. Henry Volken says remove dependency: he asks, how can action groups living in the midst of people save themselves from becoming or remaining the centre of key decision-making? This question should be asked after a decade of solid field work by which time if it has not been asked, there is no point raising it. But such questions must be raised as a result of a process of interaction from within between action group members and their rural poor. It should not be introduced from outside. It reveals poor timing, bad judgement and it presumes people have not thought of sharing responsibility and decision-making within the group itself.

I think it is easy for others who have never been involved in starting groups from scratch, who have never known what it is like to slog, sweat and go through physical hardships, see their ideas being mauled and their work being unfairly criticised, to speak of dependency as a dirty word. People's organisations encourage dependencies of a different sort. Action groups depend on their ideas for sustenance: if they are human they must lean or depend on someone or something. What is wrong when the rural poor depend on action groups? By our reading they have been used, abused, exploited and made to live like non-persons. Then there comes a group that treats them differently, that wants to build up their confidence, that want to give them tools to fight for what is due to them, that wants to show that in togetherness there is strength, that wants them to fight corrupt village level officials who are hand in glove with the rural rich *but* at the same time the group should say do not keep coming to us, you must take your own decisions, you must get together on your own and develop your 'internal strength'. You must generate and use your own knowledge for your struggle—leave us out of it.

I think at the transition stage there has to be a period of dependency. Some groups have prolonged this period because they are uncertain themselves of the monster they have created. Some just glory and thrive in it and would not like to do without the power that comes with it. But if we are working towards a fundamental change, if we would like to prove a point and set an example, dependency of the rural poor on the action group for a certain period is an absolute necessity. After all action groups are in the

business of 'destabilising' rural society as it exists in the villages today. It can only be done by lobby and pressure, by the correct and timely use of law and non-violent means. And infinite patience.

(iii) *Pulling Out:* Another attractive idea that seems to have caught the fancy of arm chair decision-makers in the development game. After a certain (again indefinite) period the activists from outside should pull out and leave what's left to the rural poor to run themselves. I wish it was quite so simple and there was less at stake than just security. What has taken a couple of generations to achieve—bringing Scheduled Castes/Tribes and landless labourers to heel—this action group is supposed to undo, perform miracles and decimate all opposition within the government and the politicians and then fade away after handing over the reins to the local leaders.

In practical terms this is possible if you are willing to gamble with the existence of the organisation and you are prepared to see the work you have done being destroyed slowly in front of your eyes. This has nothing to do with lack of confidence and faith in your second line of leadership. Neither is it a reflection on the lack of capability, competence and skill of the rural poor to handle tricky situations in the immediate area. It has something to do with—to use the current jargon—macro-linkages. There are formidable forces at work against small groups becoming independent especially of families always known to be poor and vulnerable. It is to the interest of the government functionary to keep the poor and dependent on the system. If any community or group has the impertinence to think they can do without the system, they are in for a surprise. The whole system depends on rural communities being dependent not independent. Pulling out means we shall be leaving this group exposed and vulnerable and leaving them at the mercy of powerful dominant forces. They will not allow a system within a system to survive. What then is the role of the action groups? It is to provide protection, to provide the umbrella support, to offer explanations of the critical process that is taking place and communicate it to the outside world. We need to show solidarity, we need to give an appearance of stability and unity. Withdrawal means the beginning of in-fighting in the group itself which could—and has—led to groups breaking up. Very counter-productive and soul destroying. Better the original group remains but hands over slowly and gently but physically remains

on the site. This has its own set of problems but better this than the alternative. A time will come when you yourself will feel redundant: that is the time to leave. I speak entirely from experience. Tilonia and its sub-Centres in 10 states of India is a living example of this process we have followed over the last 12 years.

General observations

This issue of security for staff and our jaded activists can never be resolved satisfactorily. I am of the opinion that a group/organisation does its best work when it is insecure, when there is uncertainty all around and our back is to a wall and there is nowhere to run. One has to take a stand. However big the organisation is, it has the built-in flexibility to take up causes that might well jeopardise the image of the agency in the eyes of the government. If it is willing to take up issues of social justice regardless of consequences of conflict or confrontation with the Establishment then the question of foreign funds and dependency is quite incidental. To Rajesh Tandon's observation that 'many action groups are accused of getting so deeply involved in action that they do not realise where they are going,' I ask is it important that we know where we are going. (I also recommend him a poster which reads 'I do not know where I am going but I am on my way'). To Henry Volken's comment that 'excessive activism (may have been responsible for) preventing groups from developing theories on the basis of experience and reflection', I think this is the exclusive job of participatory researchers not what Walter Fernandes thinks the role is 'of building up the people from below.'

When does an action group cease to be an action group? When it becomes an institution, when it no longer responds to sensitive issues that could dent their image, when it has a hierarchy and has pay scales and hours of work and family benefits and the leaders of the group have ceased to set an example for others to follow, where the second line of leaders in the group do not exist, where the group has taken on macro-issues at the expense of smaller ones closer home like taking up Public Interest Litigation case on the destruction of forests without paying mimimum wages to their own workers.

10

An Ode to Hurt Innocence: An Appeal to Friends in Social Action Groups

H. Sethi

In reacting to writings on 'Social Activists and People's Movements,' I am always struck by a series of contradictory impulses. At one level I am happy that such issues and themes are slowly finding their place on the centre stage of thinking and action about social transformation. The recognition of new—and sometimes vital—action groups is critical to enable us to move away from the obsessive preoccupation with the state and the political parties that has characterised most such writings. In a sense it is also a welcome sign that such writings have moved away from a case-study focus to an attempt at analysing the strengths and weaknesses of such efforts.

But here, my feeling of satisfaction grinds to a halt. Whether one reads about group-party relations, or about the micro-macro interactions, or about the linkage between reform and 'revolution' what to speak of the more functional writing on funding and funding agencies, relationship with government programmes, training of cadre, methodology of mobilisation etc. a streak of narcissism starts emerging. The vantage points of writing and discourse are selected on the basis of where one is currently located—implying thereby that the empirical choice is in fact the correct one.

So, for instance, if it is a member of a Left Party, or a sympathiser writing on this phenomenon, the tone is that of denunciation—wanting somehow to prove that all the work being done by social action groups is meaningless, if not harmful, to the country and society (see, for instance, Karat 1984). The normal reaction from the groups is in fact not very different. Taking on the role of 'hurt innocence' they attempt to both defend themselves and attack the parties. The language used by either both sides is vicious and denunciatory. The encounter which may have engendered a debate turns into a tirade. Camps get formed which then demand their loyalists, and as the discourse sharpens, so does the demand to prove loyalty.

It is the reality of such an environment, that I believe, should concern us. Not because someone's gentlemanly spirits are hurt, but because such an atmosphere is totally counter-productive and promotes a feeling of despair and hopelessness that can only help the forces of *status quo*.

Why have I started off in this vein? Mainly because, it is my understanding that most of the writing on social action groups is structured in terms of a response to the political parties—and even here, the reference is towards the parties of the left. Why is this so? Partly because most groups do sprout a radical phraseology—and the need then is to prove one's credentials against the largest groups that claim the legacy of Marx—the Communist parties. By the same token little need is seen by any of the groups to assess themselves vis-a-vis the different brands of the Congress and the Janata parties.

At another level most of such writing, preoccupied at it is with defence and attack, displays a tremendous sense of insecurity—of a feeling that the ground is slipping from under one's feet. They convey a feeling that social processes have become much more complex and that events are moving with such rapidity that the only course of action left is to dig in, to consolidate. This too, is a sign of defeat.

In the midst of either the acrimony directed towards perceived antagonists, or a hurt defence in an attempt to prove one's revolutionary credentials, or the expression of insecurity in the face of growing complexities, very often we tend to miss the sense of the larger drama which is unfolding and involves all of us—concerned citizens, action groups, or political parties. The central

basis of this drama is our collective inability to project the feeling of individual or group grievance into a larger national movement for social rejuvenation. The discussion on micro-reality and macro-concern and effectivity, does not quite touch the core of this problem, nor does it, in my view, even correctly present it.

Almost no observer of the current scene would disagree that the situation today is worse than it was a decade back. Yet in 1973-1974, we saw both the Bihar and Gujarat movements, which finally under the guidance of a JP snowballed into a national movement. Why does something of that kind not take place today?

Is it only because we no longer have a charismatic figure like JP, who for all his weaknesses and foibles was able to communicate a moral stature that we find completely missing these days? Or is it because having seen JP's dream destroyed by the Janata party between 1977 and 1979, we are no longer willing to risk such a movement unless there is an appropriate organisation to back it? Or is it because a national movement in today's context almost necessarily communicates, a middle class image i.e. it is not only concerned with issues of land and wages but much more with nebulous and abstract concepts like dignity and self-worth, and most groups, like the Left parties are unwilling to accept this as a basis for moving ahead.

The groups in their concentration on micro political and social space—the basic source of their strength and effectivity—may and often do end up deepening their activities. But the need is that of a simultaneous, widening of concern, so that a solution of *local grievances* does not turn into a process of *localising grievances*—a process which is strengthening daily. The need is to create a national citizenry so that each area and group is not isolated and fragmented—and the basic approach of the groups hardly helps in this.

We, thus, repeatedly confront situations where years of hard and dedicated work— in a union/a slum/or the rural areas—gets wiped out by a caste/communal/linguistic upsurge, setting both the organisation and people back considerably. How to overcome this fragmentation without hastily putting together a ragged coalition, is to my mind, the single greatest challenge facing the different individuals, groups and parties engaged in this task.

There is a second element, fundamental to the psyche of groups

which too requires greater introspection, and this relates to their accent on their non-party character. This issue too, I am posing in the context of their confrontation with political parties.

I have always maintained that the notion of politics as a specialised activity which is the sole prerogative of political parties is a fallacious one. Non-party action and groups thus have a legitimacy of their own, particularly in a context where the empirical practice of political parties leaves much to be desired. Yet, the process of aggressive confrontation with political parties contributes to their delegitimisation. And this when the dominant strategy of the ruling classes is to delegitimise politics, can turn out to be a dangerous move. Let us not forget that we are all operating in a situation of institutional flux and decay, and that our institutions (and this includes political parties)—ineffective, weak and contradictory—are all that we have as a guarantee that the political system does not turn fascist. Is not then an attack on political parties a contributory factor to this dangerous process?

Let me now come back to my first theme. A basic feeling of insecurity propels many contradictory impulses. Attitudes harden, images, both of oneself and the others, tend to freeze. One tends to overdevelop one's ego. Justification becomes the end of all existence. Social action groups are not immune to this process. Seeing themselves as central to the current or potential polity can be as dangerous as wallowing in self-pity and thus abrogating the right and the obligation to act and to intervene.

The questions before all of us are not only tactical and strategic—they are also existential. And if we cannot face the world with confidence, we will be converted into dinosaurs. And that, I am sure, will help no one.

11

Social Activists, People's Movements and Indian Women

Ginny Srivastava

The majority of Indian women are rural, poor, unorganised. The strength and hope for this nation lies with these women. How is this potential to be released? And what value is there in the ideas of the various articles in the *Social Action* issue on 'Social Activists and People's Movements' to this cause? What follows is a brief attempt to think about the main themes outlined, from the rural women's movement point of view.

The gap and the objective

The empty space, the gap between the efforts of political parties, unions, government extension workers, and the rural poor women is certainly there. However, most activist groups have not significantly touched the organisation and education of rural poor women either. Probably this was because they too are/were caught in the common mind-set that women cannot and do not think about 'serious issues', and if at all they are useful to 'the cause', it is as decoys at the front of a demonstration to confuse the police strategy (Gothoskar and Kanhere). Rural poor women are mostly illiterate; they usually do not speak the standard regional language and live and work in local dialects; they

find it hard to make time to come to meetings, because of overburdening workloads; cultural norms make it difficult for women to be 'allowed' to attend meetings—all these factors have contributed to the present situation that rural poor women have been left out. But the need is there, the need for involving women in autonomons, strong and lasting people's movements; a need to enable them to grow in self-confidence, in decision-making capacity, in organising themselves for collective action, in gaining an increasingly mature political perception (Volken).

A new type of education, and organisation, to make the women aware of their situation in order to help them become active agents of their own development, and agents of change in their society, is essential (Fernandes). But women as 'active agents' of their own development does not mean just saving themselves from rape or wife-beating, as was described in most examples in the articles in the *Social Action* issue. And woman as an agent of change in society was not really highlighted, at least certainly not for rural women.

The strength in women

Although there are still not many examples and efforts, those who have worked seriously with the rural poor have seen (and admitted) the strength of character, determination, tenacity of rural poor women. It is our experience, that when both men and women were being exploited by less than minimum wages on road construction, it was the women who were outraged when they came to know about it, and took action which eventually resulted in better wages for all—both men and women. Likewise, when a murder occurred in the area, and the murderers (money-lender group from a nearby village) bought off the doctor (post-mortem report), the police, the *sarpanch*, etc., and it seemed that nothing would happen, it was the women who were outraged at the injustice, and got the case re-investigated and the murderers arrested, thereby changing the power relations in the area, and making the area safer, for all. In hand pump struggles to get a protected water supply near the hamlets of the poor, it is the women who take time out from daily wage labouring or other work to *gherao* the drilling machine so that the hand pump is placed near the poor, and not near the relatives or political supporters

of the *sarpanch*; and yet clean water benefits the whole family. Or in wasteland development—both men and women discussed the possibility of acquiring wasteland on lease, planting economic trees, bushes, herbs, grasses to earn money over a 25 year period, and discussed the environmental advantages of reforestation, but 24 women and 3 men finally got themselves organised and took up this tough work which again will benefit the family, the community, the nation. These are national issues, at the micro-level: exploitation, injustice, corruption, nepotism, ecology.

None of the above actions could have been taken by individuals, protesting or working alone. Collective action is the only way. And the objectives of their collective strength are nothing other than the major issues facing the nation. That is why I am in some disagreement with the article, 'Role of Women in Social Change and People's Movements'. 'The aim of the women's movement is nothing short of a total change in the hierarchical relations between men, women and children' (Gothoskar and Kanhere). Or,

> The working class movement aims at freedom, autonomy to produce according to the needs of the workers, to create a world free from the values that crush it, to fashion a society that gives free expression to human creativity. The first step toward this control over oneself, one's own body. . . . This requires that women organise themselves and create a forum to express themselves, their grievances and demands (ibid).

The women's movement amongst the rural poor women is not a movement that focuses on the relations vis-a-vis men, on their reproductive systems. And when the women, all-be-it organised, meet together, in the middle-of-nowhere with no electricity, no road, no 'visibility', to whom do they express their 'grievances and demands'! No, Indian Women and People's Movements mean more than that—it means that, but more than that. Agent of change in their society means the personal, as well as the social, as well as the physical world in which they live.

How to release this strength?

Take the women seriously . . . it is as simple as that. I think that is what the authors in this journal issue are also saying when they talk about a methodology of collective discovery of social reality

(Volken) or talk about not going too fast, and allowing the people to make the decisions (Fernandes). And Rajesh Tandon and Ganesh Pandey write 'People, ordinary people, can evolve their own knowledge and theory. This is what Participatory Research is all about. People generating and using their own knowledge for their struggles.'

Women need help in getting organised—it seems that is a process that, among rural poor women, does not happen by itself. So the Activist as Organiser is needed. But once they start meeting regularly, the women are helped to analyse their existing condition—and to decide on an agenda of 'things that need to be done', and to decide what, and how, they should do, and when. The analysis and decisions are theirs—the Activist is a Catalyst in these processes. They know the issues that are 'pinching' them the most, and/or they know their potential and what they can take up first, or second. They know the culture within which they have to live, and how fast they can move, on which issues. And because they are so untouched by development processes, they have a fresh, and innovative way of thinking about problems and issues. In our experience, it has helped new groups to hear true stories of women's actions and struggles in other places. These stories help them to think, 'If they can do it, so can we.' The stories also expand their experience, which is limited usually to about a 20 km. radius, and to age-old traditional patterns of life. Study tours have also helped to expand experience.

We have found that with rural poor women, who live some distance from the main roads, the medium of film (and probably video-tape would be the same) is not effective. It goes too fast; the medium is new and confusing; the sound-track is in the regional language. We have found slides effective, but with the dialogue told by the trainer, in local dialect, with discussion, and not using any accompanying tape (it also goes too fast, in regional language). Puppets, or drama are effective. The medium of People's Theatres, as outlined in the Kidd and Rashid article, could be effective with rural poor women, but they would, in all likelihood, not be the actresses. *Sharam* (shyness) and the fact that in many/most rural dramas, the women's parts are played by men, would prevent women from performing in public, at least at this point in history. However, we have used role plays (some of which go on for about 1 hour) effectively with women, to work

out by drama how to solve some problem (like how to get women to come to a meeting), or to see the reality through drama of some problems (like the way the caste council discriminates against women in cases). Discussion and analysis then follows. But these mini-dramas, created during group trainings or leadership trainings, are effective forms of 'people's theatre' in this context.

In other words, we believe the women can think about their condition, and decide what needs to be done, and how to do it. But our role as Activist Educators is to help them to think about alternatives, and to learn how to think systematically, and collectively.

We have faith in their 'knowing' and 'decision-making' abilities. The authors in this book share this faith. The faith is there that women do have this latent ability and strength, but it needs some time to be fully realised. And it needs some space to do so, too. I agree with the analysis of how to bring about this fulness, made by Ghotoskar and Kanhere when they talk about the need for women's groups to be separate, at least for some time, and some issues, at first. Many talk about the problems of the rural poor being those of class, not of any one sex. That is true and the objective is to have men and women working together on the class problems they face. But if women start meeting with men before they have gained their own sense of self-confidence, then the end result will not be participation—it will be only men and women sitting at the same time and place, and the men talking, in the name of 'equality'. Gothoskar and Kanhere write:

> In a society where culturally men dominate over women, organisations that take up issues common to both are likely to undermine those that relate more specifically to women even within the framework of that organisation.
>
> Hence the stress on autonomy, so that women have time and space to grapple with their own selves before additional dimensions and the consequent complications are introduced within the movement.

Women social activists

In the articles, the authors allude to the fact that many young men in recent years have come forward to work with the disadvantaged, and fill the gap, and work with the rural poor (Volken).

But most of the women working with rural poor are 'welfare workers', running *balwadis*, serving the health and delivery needs of the women. Very few are 'activists', moving from village to village meeting with women in the night (the only time they have to meet), searching out land records, meeting the *thanedar*, etc. But there are some!

Some fall into the category of the 'activists' referred to in the articles—young, from the middle class, university educated. Some of these are married to male activists—a good idea, if possible! But there are not many such Indian women who are ready for the Activist Life—and if they are ready, their families are not ready. So, many activists are 'developed from below'. Some rural women, who are usually literate, but may have formal schooling anywhere from 8th class 'fail' (even) onwards, are developed into good grassroots activists, by concerned team who gives them training, and opportunities for 'action' and 'reflection'. The scarcity of the university educated middle class women has meant that some of the issues discussed related to activist living conditions and life-style, do not apply to many women activists who have a rural background and simple life-style. The issues and problems are also different; like, how to be open and friendly with male team-mates, and with village men and officials, without appearing to 'lead them on'.

Some activists working with rural poor women are men. In the absence of enough female activists, some men can and do work with rural women. Many men steer themselves away from work with women, thinking that they cannot do it, or that the women would not talk to them, or that they don't know how. Men can work with women and indeed, must do so. One role is to start the process with a group of women, and some women leaders will emerge. Then a continuing support role would emerge. We have found extremely sensitive and helpful men willing to work for women, in the external, macro-support organisations as well.

The role of the activists is as outlined in the articles in the above papers—organiser, educator, catalyst. Activists working with women must not go too fast and become too impatient, and move ahead taking decisions which the women's organisation should take to become strong. Their educator role is to create leadership and cadres for the people's movement. This is done by specific training programmes, of 1 or 3 or 5 days in length.

The training events are participatory and frequent. Sometimes, training women in the working of various systems is done by the Activist going with the women's group, or its representatives, to some office or institution. The Activist should never go 'instead of' the group.

The Activist, it seems to me, also performs the role of the 'external support', and link with the 'macro-organisations' and 'macro-movement', for the local people's group or women's group much in the same way that the 'macro-agencies, i.e. researchers and institutions perform a supportive role to the action groups' through the Activists (see Fernandes). The roles are important, whether they are performed by the macro-agency with the action group animators/activists, or whether by the animator/activist with the micro people's organisation. These roles as enumerated by Fernandes are:

1. facilitate an ongoing process of reflection on their social reality and their role in it.
2. help action groups analyse their local experience in the macro-perspective. 'Many are at a loss as to what step to take next once they are successful in a struggle which is not only geographically local but often remains ideologically localised.'
4. facilitating action groups to keep looking outward and beyond, and not inward on fights and personality struggles.
4. present information on macro-movements and policy so that micro-action can be seen within a broader perspective.
5. as an outsider, support the people's struggles, and give support to enable the people to sustain the struggle.

As activists, they are 'outsiders, who are not to be permanent doers but are to be catalytic agents in order to create animators in the communities . . . their primary responsibility is the identification and formation of local animators' (Fernandes).

By and large, women activists are non-political-party people, and they are working with groups outside a party framework. The leftist women activists have seen the cultural legacy of 'women as second class citizens' in male colleagues in the party, and have understood the need for a separate women's movement.

> The women's movement which began to take shape in the 1970s in India, and developed into a vocal and articulate

77 COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL 471/1.

> movement in the 1980s, has challenged this concept (of social change or revolution . . . centred round capturing state power) and has in fact deepened the understanding of social change as a radical change in all the social relations . . . It sees social change not as a cataclysmic event but as a slow and sure process given in the very day-to-day practical struggles of the oppressed (Gothoskar and Kanhere).
>
> By revolution, many people imply capture of state power. This is a very narrow definition of revolution. Changes in attitudes, values, life-styles, are also important elements of revolution. The work of some action groups has helped to enlarge the definition of revolution. Many have focused on the totality of human existence and not just the mode of production. It is the work of these action groups which has brought health, education, sanitation, drinking water . . . ecology and forests, children, women's issues . . . all into the purview of revolution by acting on these issues (Tandon and Pandey).

Despite the advantages of party linkages to give a larger organisation to sustain long struggles, women activists view political parties as being too narrow, and 'unworthy' of our support and energy. Better to build a separate people's movement outside party line.

Problems faced by the women's movement

Splintering of the action group is a problem in the women's movement. Henry Volken's analysis that if the activists are 'succeeding in bringing to life, and in nurturing a regional people's movement through a cadre emerging from among them, the core group cannot split up. The qualities of its relationship with the people will prevent this from happening'. I must admit that I find teams working with the rural women less likely to split than those working with urban women's issues. But the principle in general is probably sound.

A possible reason for splintering too may be that the self-selection process that brings an Indian woman to the place of being an Activist, is one which almost by definition, means that the person is assertive, independent thinking, bold—quite a strong character. Several strong charactered, independent thinking women working together would require maturity, task-orientation and a sense of humour on all sides, not to mention some help and perspective from a 'macro-agency'! Male activists are

individualistic too, but the cultural revolt is probably greater for women activists, and no doubt contributes to team splintering.

The women's movement as a whole is one that is marked by a feeling of 'sisterhood'. I have found that there is only one type of woman activist that is hard to come close to, in the movement, and that is the Marxist, or theoretical Communist. What keeps us apart, it seems to me, is the Marxists' feeling that she knows the strategy for social change, that she is guiding the people in that direction, and that the shape of the New Society has also some definite shape and characteristics. Others of us are going more slowly, and are discovering and unfolding the future with the people. Henry Volken states the point well:

> If the social analysis is mainly done by the activists and expresses little the real experience acquired by the people subsisting within this oppressive reality, then it is likely to remain very subjective and inadequate. This also can explain to a considerable extent the wide divergence in the perception of this reality among activists of various groups. What really keeps them apart is, in fact, the shared inability to learn from the people. This again indicates the practice of a methodology which does not give importance to the process of collective discovery of social reality. The very idea of conscientising others contains a contradiction and illegitimately assumes to possess the life experience of the others.

The other major problem of the movement is the shortage of women activists/organisers/educators who are well enough educated that they can conceptualise strategies, principles, alternatives, do training programmes, meet and deal with district level and other senior officials, and yet be ready to move in the rural areas, often on foot, sleep in tribal huts and 'be with the people'. The grass roots woman animator/organiser we can develop, from the field. But the lack of this level of leadership, this kind of Activist, is a problem for the women's movement.

Conclusion

There is a lot to be learnt from these papers by one working in the women's movement. It is hoped that the dialogue will continue—may be even another issue on rural women's groups' Activists and rural women's movement analyses. Women activists (like all activists) take or make very little time for writing

their reflections. While putting together such an issue might drive the editor to distraction, nevertheless, the result would be useful. It is hoped that this small reaction to the issue as a whole (and not just to the one article on women) has added a bit to the richness of the insights laid out in the writings on 'Social Activists and People's Movements'.

12

Catalysts of a People's Movement

Philip Viegas

Social action groups have by now become a widespread phenomenon that can no longer be taken for granted let alone overlooked. They have over the past one and a half decades taken deep roots in the social structure of rural India. That they have made some impact even on the political structure is clear from the controversies raised about them in the leftist party circles. Because of this impact, even the Prime Minister has directed that voluntary agencies* be involved in the implementation of anti-poverty and minimum needs programmes. Similarly if one is to go by the inclinations of the Government at the last meeting of the National Development Council, April 1983, when the approach paper on the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) was accepted, it appears that voluntary agencies will have a much greater and a more direct role to play in the implementation of these programmes at the grassroots level (Roy 1984).

This could be interpreted as a recognition at the highest

*From among the voluntary agencies have sprung some very active groups known as 'action groups' and the members of these groups are known as 'social activists'. Hence it needs to be noted right at the outset that although all action groups come under the tag of voluntary organisations, not all voluntary organisations are action groups. The issues raised in the present paper deal only with action groups.

political level, of the significant contribution of voluntary agencies to the socio-economic changes at the grassroots level. Although this augurs well for the action groups, one can also see a danger in it. It calls for a discrete alertness on the part of social activists. The danger inherent in this is one of cooptation into the system, the very system that the action groups have been disillusioned with and which therefore is the raison d'etre for their emergence and existence. The danger itself, obviously, should by no means frighten the groups away from taking any positive step forward. One does not throw away the baby along with the bath water. Rather this opportunity should serve as an occasion for reviewing the perspective of the groups. It should prod them on to look back and analyse their orientation, ideology, structure and strategy. In the light of this analysis and orientation, future activity may or may not be undertaken. It is important not to lose sight of the wider perspective.

Many of these questions have been discussed in the papers published here. While reacting to the various issues raised here this paper will attempt to specify and clarify this wider perspective against the background of which an analysis of the orientation and functioning of the action groups will be taken up. It will review the assumptions which form the operational base of the action groups. Within the context of this broader perspective, their structure and strategy too will be discussed.

Perspective

While discussing action groups and the different modalities their involvement takes at the grassroots level, the broader objective of their activity, of their very existence appears to be sidelined, viz. people's movement. Instead much emphasis appears to be laid on the micro-perspective and at times even on the macro. The latter, however, is generally understood as the 'national level' or more precisely, as the general framework of the national politico-social and economic structures as opposed to the local. What is forgotten or ignored in the process, albeit inadvertently, is the prime objective of this current phenomenon of the emergence and proliferation of action groups, viz., 'people's movement.' Fundamentally, the primary function of action groups is to activate a people's movement not in any way dissimilar to the one

that Mahatma Gandhi was instrumental in mobilising. Their role primarily is to be catalysts in this movement.

However, it cannot become a movement if only a few groups function at the local level and, given their limited resources, cater to only a limited number of villages. Nor can it acquire the momentum it requires by means of a few shy attempts at giving it a macro-perspective. If it is to be a people's movement in every sense of the word, it should reach out to a much wider section of the population. In other words, the movement ought to pick up momentum and acquire a revolutionary nature.

Action groups are perhaps too easily criticised as being reformists rather than revolutionary. Referring to this issue, Tandon and Pandey state, 'Changes in attitudes, values, life-styles are also important elements of revolution' and that revolution cannot be narrowed down to imply merely 'capture of state power.' What is important is that the action groups have a revolutionary impact in the sense that they will bring about the necessary structural changes in the present socio-political system and bring about significant changes in the attitudes, values and life-style of the larger society. Short of this wider perspective, these changes might take place only within a small local group which of itself cannot have repercussions of a revolutionary nature. This can be done only by mobilising the masses to a much greater extent than has hitherto been done.

Many action groups are working at the micro-level. They do take up serious issues along with the people. Much work is definitely being done in terms of mobilisation of the people etc. But it seems to stop short at the micro-level, or at the level of the particular local group. The preoccupation with the micro-level is a reflection of the lack of the wider perspective of a people's movement. Perhaps as a result of the awareness of this lack of the larger perspective and also to widen their horizon, a dash of macro-perspective is provided to these micro-level activities, more as a symbol and a token than as an effective means. For instance, some legal issues are taken up at the highest judicial authority of the nation. Often too, the higher executive machinery at the state and national levels are approached. Although the advisability and effectiveness of these measures cannot be undervalued, it is not these attempts to provide the movement a macro-perspective that will make it a people's movement.

On the contrary, if not used discretely, these attempts risk the danger of cooptation, as mentioned earlier, and could even mean implicitly the acceptance of the prevalent socio-political and economic structures, which could also be conveniently interpreted as such by vested interests.

What then is a people's movement? When could one say that a people's movement has taken place or struck roots? What are its identifying characteristics? Briefly, the mature awakening of the entire nation to the oppressive socio-political structures in the country; when the voiceless regain their power of speech and are being heard; when the powerless acquire the capability to decide for themselves and not be merely catered to from on top—these may be considered to be the signs of a genuine people's movement.

Questioning assumptions

On the one hand given the firm moorings of the action groups in the rural areas, their chances of setting in motion this movement seem very high. On the other hand, given the present operational set-up there may be reason to doubt this high degree of probability. The present structures of the action groups are perhaps taken too much for granted. They need to be seriously rethought if they are to move effectively towards a people's movement.

As most writers in this work say, the emergence and the ongoing activity of action groups presuppose the following: (1) a disbelief in the larger as well as the local political structures (not because they are intrinsically incapacitating and inefficient but rather because they are existentially inoperative and empirically dysfunctional; (2) a belief in micro-level action and (3) a belief in people's power.

1. *Disbelief in the prevalent political structure*

Time and again it has been stated that action groups have sprung up because of their disillusionment with the way the political structure of the country functions. Various authors of the papers (Fernandes, Volken, Manohar, Tandon, Pandey) have expressed the dissatisfaction and disillusionment of social activists with

political parties. Hence their emergence would be seen as an alternative to the political parties in as far as people's development goes.

They have also pointed out the dangers of cooptation into the established political structure. They attempt to capitalise on the foothold of the action groups that are searching for macro-support and in practice work towards the splintering and even dissolution of the groups.

This underlying factor of disbelief in the prevalent political structure has a significant impact on the functioning of the group. First, it makes them dissociate themselves from any direct political involvement. I am not necessarily speaking here of linking up with any particular party, but rather of political action proper that has a direct impact on their life. Hence the question arises here of political involvement vis-a-vis an effective people's movement. Can a people's movement effectively take shape devoid of their direct political involvement? In other words, can they by opting to remain outside the political structure bring about a real movement? Should the people the groups are working with, not be introduced into the political structure and encouraged to take an active role in it? This distrust of the political structure, so far as it leads to a reawakening of the people and points to the necessity of an alternative, might be considered positively; but to the extent it makes people shy away from direct political involvement, a rethinking is called for at each group level. This, of course, presumes that the political structure as such is not bad but rather that its constituent elements need to be pruned of the vested interests and replaced by genuinely interested and concerned citizens. Although the structure as such might remain unchanged it will be given a new perspective which ought to transform it into a horizontal structure from the present vertical one.

We are not referring merely to indirect non-party political action but rather to political action proper that has a direct impact on the life of the people. This is to be seen on two levels—the level of the social activists themselves and on the level of the people. It may not be proper for the activist to get directly involved in politics. He should rather play the supporting role of a catalyst. It is the people who should be encouraged to get directly involved in political action by standing for local elections.

However, affiliation with any one established political party as they function today does not seem to further the objectives and may even bring about polarisation within the group causing an eventual split and/or loss of identity through cooptation as has been pointed out by Fernandes.

2. *Belief in micro-level action.*

This assumption underlies every activity of action groups since most of what they undertake is at the local level. This compensates for what is lacking in the planning at the national or macro-level. It takes into account all the specific sociological, psychological and cultural aspects of the particular situation in the planning and implementation of its programmes. This attention to specificity of the situation is what lends micro-level action its effectiveness.

However, there lies a hidden danger in this presupposition too. To some extent it has been alluded to by Nalini Nayak who speaks of the possibility of action groups disintegrating because of radicalism without a perspective. Micro-level action necessarily involves an achievement or target-oriented group. This of itself presents a double-edged problem or preoccupation—the target-group-preoccupation and the target-achievement-preoccupation. These two pre-occupations give the group an overly possessive feeling of 'my group' and 'my project', thereby narrowing down the operation of the group exclusively to that particular local area and closing their doors to other villages wherein the movement too could have taken roots through their efforts. Thus, in this sort of micro-level action there is the tendency to lose sight of the larger perspective of the prime objective, i.e. people's movement. Hence it is somewhat difficult to agree with Nalini Nayak that 'they have no alternative but to launch into organisational activity' though outside the parties.

3. *Belief in people's power.*

This is the prime motivating force behind the programmes that are geared towards the mobilisation of the people and community organisation. It reflects a down-right denunciation of domination and being dictated to from on top. It also underscores the

most important component of a people's movement indicating that the local level decision-making should be in the hands of the respective local people (Mehta 1983), that it is only in empowering the powerless (Volken et al., 1982), that such a movement can be brought about. It reflects a very strong belief, although implicitly, in the potential of the poor, the illiterate and the marginalised. It means that they can take their destiny in their own hands and build it up. It defies the belief implicitly in the higher political and social structures of our society that the illiterate and hungry masses need to be spoon fed, which supposition, incidentally, is important for the very survival of these prevalent oppressive structures. Hence challenging such an underlying belief with a counter underlying belief diametrically opposed to it is like pulling the rug off their feet and shaking the very foundations of the vast super-structure.

Does this then not imply a major threat to the present political structures in the country? What repercussions can this threat have on the very existence of the action groups, which in all probability could see the end of the people's movement? Hence it is absolutely essential for the action groups to be fully aware of this and be discrete in their enthusiasm, lest in the process the movement gets violently nipped in the bud.

Structure

The way a group is structured can either be supportive of the task it undertakes or it can be a constant constraint on the group thereby hindering its work. Ironically, centralisation seems to be plaguing many action groups, although the methodology adopted by them in their work in the field possesses a specific participatory orientation. As Volken rightly states, this centralisation is manifest in mainly two areas: unilateral decision-making and control of group finances and other assets. Such a centralisation introduces a hierarchy within the group itself which of necessity implies inequality. Hence in the group there are 'high' and 'low' members, the very class stratification the groups are striving to abolish right outside their living quarters. Centralisation also connotes a sense of distrust in the other members which they do not fail to perceive. The moment this distrust is conveyed to the members regardless of how subtle a form it takes, the members

are bound to merely tolerate each other and eventually lead to a split in the group.

A corollary of this is not only the lack of development of leadership within the group itself but also the lack of development of the local cadre which is the stepping stone to the formation of the people's movement. This being the essential pre-requisite for the shaping of a people's movement, as long as no local cadre is developed not even the seed of a people's movement can be sown. no matter how long the group has been operating in the area.

Stability is yet another important structural element of the group that does not necessarily help in the development of a people's movement. Stability here is referred to in terms of location and in terms of expansion of group membership. Stability of location refers to the attitude of a group to 'pitch its tent' in an area and has no plans to move out of there. Stability in terms of group expansion refers to the disposition of an established group to restrict its membership only to those who are already firmly established instead of keeping it open to admitting new members.

The dangers inherent in the former type of stability have already been discussed in the section on micro-level action. Such a closed attitude to moving out to other locations can be the death of the movement. In other words the group, in order to be able to spread the movement, should remain mobile. Once its objective in an area is fulfilled, it should withdraw from that area and move on to another fertile field. This withdrawal, however, as Volken points out, should not be premature.

This is very closely related to the latter form of stability since expansion of the group is a must for opening out to other locations and thus keep the movement alive and growing. If not checked in time, stability can lead to stagnation and ultimately to the death of the movement.

An alternative

This brings us to propose some guidelines to an alternative structure that might be more conducive to the growth of a people's movement. This structure requires the formation of a core group and other smaller groups. These smaller groups are at the same time part of the core group and yet enjoy full functional autonomy. They together form a sort of loose federation, and the

core group serves as an umbrella that keeps them together. Regularly they ought to get together to address themselves regarding issues of mutual concern and to keep each other abreast of what is happening in their respective groups as well as to seek and confirm their mutual support for one another. The introduction of a structural modality of this sort would help the groups to cater to a much wider cross section of the rural population. It will serve to break down the barriers of 'my target group' and 'my pet target project' and help the group to open out to many more villages.

The group's attitude towards stability of location too needs to be rethought. This issue is to a certain extent discussed by Volken in his paper. Keeping in mind the primary objective of their activity, and as has already been mentioned, if the formation of the local cadre is the necessary condition, the group should think of withdrawing from that area once it is felt that the movement has been set in motion so as to sow the seeds of the movement in another area. However, as Volken points out, care should be taken not to make a premature withdrawal. At the same time, at least initially the withdrawal does not mean a complete cutting off of ties with the area. Contact should be maintained to the degree and duration it is deemed called for. This modality of mobility seems to me to be an important feature in the group structure if any significant dent is to be made in the formation of a people's movement.

While this loose federation may function at the local and regional levels, a similar one, structured fundamentally along the same lines, could be tried out at the state level. Something to this effect is currently being tried out in Orissa in the form of 'Orissa Action Groups' (OAG) which has been only a partially succcessful federation. The little success it has achieved may be attributed primarily to its highly unstructured manner of functioning. It has no permanent office holders as such. It meets every 4 months and at every meeting a convener is appointed, who is responsible for organising the next meeting, preparing the agenda etc. In its approach it prioritises issues that are of common concern and lends support (moral, financial, personnel etc.) to those groups that are facing problems unique to their involvement. By way of an example of a problem of common concern, the OAG, took a common stand at a meeting on forestry in March 1984, jointly organised by the Government of Orissa and SIDA—

some thing that no individual group would have been able to do. As an example of support to individual groups, one can mention the solidarity of several groups in the state in the wake of the Western Coal Fields Ltd. acquiring land for mining in Sambalpur district and in the process displacing some hundreds of families without a proper rehabilitation plan.

This does away with any formal hierarchical set-up and its resultant power struggles, thereby increasing group cohesiveness and efficiency at the functional level. However, does such an alliance form an alternative to the support sought from political parties? Jagdish Pradhan would have us believe that it does. But it is too early to assert this with any sense of confidence. Perhaps these groupings should have a different objective, not that of becoming an alternative to political parties.

Volken makes a strong case for another type of mobility that characterises his Nagpur based Mobile Orientation and Training Team (MOTT). This is different from the locational 5-10 year stability mentioned above which in my opinion is essential to make an impact on the people one is working with. The MOTT mobility lacks the "locational stability" of the action groups i.e. a stability in which the groups do not overstay their welcome in an area but commence work with the disposition to move out once their work is accomplished. Therefore, this mobility of MOTT which is strongly advocated by Volken does not seem suitable for setting in motion a people's movement.

Although much can be said in favour of this kind of mobility, it necessarily implies moving from place to place, or from group to group, stigmatised as an "outsider" and as an "expert". With these two suffixes attached to the person of the well intentioned activist, it becomes extremely difficult for the people to identify themselves with him and for him with the people. He may be able to identify himself with the issue at hand but not with the people since effective identification is a two-way process. For such a mutual identification to take place, there is no substitute to living with the people. This helps him to prepare the ground for any future collaborative effort by proving his credibility, gaining their confidence and developing a deep sense of mutual loyalty. This obviously requires time. Precisely this curcial temporal factor is lacking in the proposition advocated by Volken.

The splintering of groups should be seen within a context. Volken

calls this "the most striking disease affecting action groups", and categorically states that "the core group cannot split." However, in the light of what has been said above about group structure, there does not seem anything sacred about unity for unity's sake in a group. Of necessity this structure implies the splitting of the group so as to enable it to spread out. I agree with Volken that group unity is an all important condition for a strong regional people's movement. But at the same time, if a certain incompatibility is experienced by the members, it is perhaps an indication for these members to function on their own in another region and still maintain functional unity. Obviously, as Nalini Nayak says, this split may be the result of conflicts between activists and not of any genuine misunderstanding or incompatibility. It may be due to differences on the personal level or in the manner in which the particular group functions. However, if the split is properly understood, unity may be sought at a much deeper level which binds the group together into a loose federation. It is to this effect that the group splitting phenomenon (provided the split is not the result of two diametrically opposed ideologies), could be better and more constructively utilised.

In the same light it can also be seen that the institutionalisation and highly structured manner of functioning can only serve to hinder the progress of a people's movement. Briefly, flexibility in the organisational structure of the group and the openness to group splitting and launching out to new areas are essential ingredients for the spread of a people's movement.

Strategy

To enable the achievement of this prime objective of a people's movement, a three-pronged approach in strategy is called for comprising three levels of power achievement, viz. political, economic and social. These three areas form a composite whole of the entire fabric of social equality. People possess political power when the decision-making power is vested in their hands. In so far as they are ruled over by outsiders and are dominated by them, to that extent they are not politically free citizens, but are still under the same yoke of colonialism but with one difference: the present colonialists are their power hungry fellow citizens with deeply rooted vested interests. Similarly, economic power accrues

from economic independence—a state that the small farmer and the daily wage labourers achieve when they no longer rely on the landlord as such for their daily sustenance but are able to earn their daily bread from the produce of their land, livestock and wage labour. This relative economic independence then becomes a source of greater bargaining power with the local landlords against whom they have to constantly stage a struggle for survival and economic equality. Where this economic independence is lacking the exploitation of the local labour by the landlords and contractors has no limits. Lastly, social power flows from breaking down social barriers that result from such social institutions as the caste system, bonded labour, sex discrimination etc.

All these three "powers" are essential for building up a just society. One without the other is meaningless. Nor can they be chronologically subordinated one to the other. Struggle for the three powers should go hand in hand. Although distinct, they are interrelated and inseparable.

It is precisely this interrelationship between these three levels that is not clearly understood by the groups. The inappropriateness of their approach may be primarily attributed to the inadequate understanding of this interrelationship. This is perhaps why one often sees groups striving with the people for one or the other of these powers with the exclusion of the other two. One group for instance, would emphasise economically oriented programmes so as to eventually make the community economically self-sufficient, and thereby liberate them from the clutches of middlemen and contractors. Some other groups focus exclusively on the social aspects fighting against such unjust social institutions as bonded labour, the dowry system, caste discrimination etc. However, a prolonged struggle against these issues becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the hungry majority, since such a struggle often demands foregoing work for some days in order to be able to attend the camps and community meetings to sort out the issues. This becomes economically unfeasible for the peasant and the daily wage earner. Hence such a struggle for social power cannot be pursued unless simultaneously economic power too is sought after.

Similarly, political power has an extremely crucial role to play in this struggle for economic and social power. Experience has amply proved that if political pressure is not brought on the con-

cerned political and administrative cells, the likelihood of such a struggle bearing any fruit is extremely low if not nil. This indicates that if the people themselves possess this bargaining power in the political arena a holistic development has better prospects.

It is true, as Tandon and Pandey say, that many action groups have succeeded in bringing issues such as health, ecology, sanitation and culture into the purview of revolution by acting on them. But in too many cases one notices a lack of understanding of the inter-linkages of these issues. Consequently, groups remain at an individual issue and do not go to a holistic understanding. Often the groups do not possess the resources required for such an in-depth study. This is where the support of an organisation, qualified to give such research assistance, fits in. It is in this kind of supportive capacity and other issues discussed by Fernandes in his paper, that outside institutions can give the macro-perspective to the people's movement. Hence the value of the three-pronged strategy in the effective catalisation of the people's movement with its mutual interrelationship clearly understood and with knowledge as its key component cannot be over-estimated.

Conclusion

The emergence of action groups has raised hopes of a better future among the marginalised sections of our society. They have over the last two decades turned out to be a force to be reckoned with. Whether as a token or not, even the government has taken note of this force. This is no cause for complacency. The groups should ambitiously pursue this and by virtue of their direct and valuable experience at the grassroots level should strive to make their presence felt at the national planning and policy-making level. Being satisfied at merely being inducted into the government machinery at the implementation level could gradually transform them into mere puppets whose strings are pulled by someone else.

Among the other group issues that also need attention is the one of inter-personal relationship at the intra-group level which often comes in the way of serious application to the field. Such differences could be ironed out and put to a more constructive use. With the aid of regular group reflection, dialogue and critical self-evaluation, the groups can be very powerful catalysing agents in the birth of a genuine people's movement.

Writers Reply

A. Indian Women: Issues of Struggle (*Vijay Kanhere and Sujata Gothoskar*)

Most of India's women are from the rural poor families—landless labourers and poor farmers. Most of their basic struggles are around trying to get enough to eat for their families and for themselves—getting food, water and fuel. Women are the ones who toil the most for all these three—at home as well as outside. This involves their labouring in the fields, sometimes for less money than men get and more harassment from the landowners. Women have often to walk for miles together to get water, a job done only by women. For fuel too women have to walk for miles in the forests, confront forest officials, fight against sexual harassment, including rape. Women labourers often have to get up hours before men of the house to cook the morning meals for the entire family. Then they leave the house with their infants, look after them in the fields, feed them in the afternoon, work on the fields again. In the evenings, women do the cooking for the evening meal, while men sit outside and smoke or chat. After all this, the entire family minus the women eat first, and the women eat the left-overs, the last. Men never wash the utensils after the meal. That too is a task done exclusively by women. Again at dawn, when the woman grinds the corn on the heavy grinding wheel, men are fast asleep.

During illness, children and men are looked after by women; while the illness of women is the last priority, which is amply demonstrated by the available statistics. The terse statement that the women to men ratio is fast declining means that in India thousands of women are meeting their premature end every year.

All this is reinforced by the fact that women have little control over the conditions and products of their labour, over the means of producing them, over their lives. Women have hardly any property rights and their labour, however important for the upkeep of their family, is treated as easily dispensable. This too results in the downgrading of women in the family and consequently in society. This entire situation gives rise to and is reinforced by practices like dowry, atrocities like wife-beating, murder, rape and so on.

Every lack of facility in the rural areas therefore has different implications for men and women. When e.g., there is no electricity in the village, it not only means 'no "visibility,"' as Ginny Shrivastava puts it, but it also means an addition to the double burden of women, as no electricity also means no flour mills in many places. This means that women have to grind the grains very early in the morning, as grinding of grains is done exclusively by women. It means much less sleep. It means having to walk in the dark for long distances, for lack of toilet facilities. And they have to fear not only animals and reptiles, but also men. Even availability of less food though tough for the entire community and the rural family, affects women more severely.

The problems of rural women, their assertion, expression, organisations have this milieu as their background. Which aspect of their situation is expressed in their organisations and struggles will depend on their perception of the situation in that particular phase of their life-situation. Hence we tend to disagree with Ginny Srivastava when she writes:

> The women's movement amongst the rural poor women is not a movement that focuses on relations vis-a-vis men, on their reproductive systems.

For one thing, 'a movement that focuses on relations vis-a-vis men' and 'on reproductive systems' are not synonymous as implied by Ginny. The former also includes struggles of women to be included in the *panch* (in Sangli), struggles against wife-beating (in Shahada), against bride-price (in Shahada), for property rights for women (in Sakri-Navapur and Bihar), against bigamy (in Sakri-Navapur) for equal wages against the wishes of the male labourers (in Maharashtra) and many others.

Secondly the struggles that women have waged against attacks

on their sexuality are equally important. Struggles against rape, sexual harassment have been taken up in the rural areas as well. In fact, police rapes, gang rapes by landlord-*goondas* are more frequent in the rural areas.

In the complex reality of rural India, it would be dangerous to agree with what Ginny Shrivastava says above. And it is all the more dangerous to counterpose the two 'types' of struggles she has mentioned. E.g. when a deserted, *dalit*, labouring woman is struggling with the other labourers for say, higher wages, and an upper-class, upper-caste man rapes her, various strands of the hierarchical relations in society are expressed. Which particular strand that woman and others experience and highlight would depend upon the particular situation at that point of time. But when one looks at it from the point of view of the women's movement as a whole, leaving any one relation involved would be lethal for the cause as a whole.

B. People's Movements, Social Activists and National Problems (*Nimai Bhai*)

We are living now in a country where the administration is acting as the main instrument of exploitation and corruption, where hypocrisy is winning and where the people's servants have become the real masters of the people. The innocent, illiterate, ignorant common people—the masses—are being exploited by the paper-tigers whose numbers are increasing day by day. Through the dignified process of planned development, centres of exploitation like cities and towns have grown neglecting the rural areas and subjecting villages to destruction. Slogans and advertisements overwhelm the real people's minds and create the so called public opinion. Our democracy is a refined form of autocracy. Though the people are the real makers of a democratic government, they have no right to pull down their representatives whenever they are dissatified with their actions.

Our governments have no control over the internal money circulation nor any concrete ideas as to how to control it. The mixed economy system has neither stabilised the old agricultural economy nor established an industrial economy to eradicate poverty. Major projects have created problems of corruption, exploitation, dissatisfaction, frustration, disillusionment, unemployment, pollu-

tion, polarisation, prostitution and destitution; administrative unrest and many such evils have stood in the way of a sound and peaceful administration.

On the one hand we have started executing the famous 20-point programme to eradicate poverty through rehabilitation of the rural poor, the landless and marginal farmers, labourers, the homeless; on the other hand, the government are making thousands of happy families landless, homeless and destitute through their project-operations for large-scale industrialisation. Poverty is spreading throughout the country. Unemployment is increasing day by day. Our foreign and internal loans of Rs. 8,000 crores for development programmes will stand out as a national headache for generations to come, about which nobody is bothered. Thus a permanent loan of about Rs. 700/- per family is a permanent liability. Without our knowledge it may endanger the independence of our country at any time.

The internal quarrels between the political leaders of our country not only stand in the way of our internal national unity and integration but divide our families and the social structure. Elections are such a platform from where this evil is spreading along with a variety of corrupt practices, hooliganism, unrest of different nature.

Our People's Movement should be able to fight against all these problems, the means of exploitation, corruption against social and administrative evils and attempt to set up a sound, stable and peaceful administration which could help the people to lead a peaceful and happy life in its real sense. Hence their role is not merely local as Bunker Roy says.

In a democratic set up where people's representatives are there to look after the well-being of the common people (the masses in general), to eradicate the means of poverty, misery, exploitation and corruption, to formulate laws and rules for its implementation, for better administration, what should be the role of a social Activist?

A social activist is neither a philanthropist nor a spiritualist or economist or capitalist, but an activist whose actions will revolutionise the minds of society to establish new social values and order to lead a harmonious, peaceful, active life of joy and happiness for the masses, the common people at large. He is to act as a strong medium to make the common people aware of their own

rights and duties and to prepare them for a joyful disciplined living full of light and lustre. He is to act as a check on the social and administrative evils and socio-economic exploitation of the common masses either by the vested interests or by the administration. In a country like ours where strange contradictions are developing day by day, a social activist has a tremendous role to play.

The Indian National Congress which is the oldest national political organisation and which has, after many battles, fought her non-violent way to freedom, is now dead. It has been split into so many political parties that it has lost its role to fight the socio-economic battle which the country need snow. The last parliamentary poll has completely wiped out the opposition and has brought a new young leadership to power which may lead the country to heaven or hell. When such is the political scene, social activists should organise themselves to be treated as a single Third Force to lead the country at this critical juncture. This is both their moral and national responsibility which one and all activist should feel and consider. Time demands it and the country's need is now for such a Third Force.

C. Emerging Concerns of Social Action Groups in India (*Rajesh Tandon*)

Several reactions to the earlier papers on the theme of Social Activists and People's Movements' highlight the importance of looking at the action groups critically, It has been recognised that they are not just a transient phenomenon, and that they are making an important contribution. I would like to propose, and in some cases reiterate, four key aspects of social action groups as presently unfolding.

1. Political action

Whatever may be the starting or entry point of a social action group, it has implications for political action. In fact, the very word action has political connotations. Changes in health care, forests, women's status, literacy rate etc. etc. are likely to entail changes in power structures and power positions; hence, social action is simultaneously a political action in these areas. This is more so when action groups use the organisational strategy to build

people's movements on these issues. As Ajit Roy has also mentioned, social action groups have a political role to play—let us not be naive or confused about it.

2. Political space

The second, and related, issue is that political space in our society is increasingly available for social action groups to act. The organised parties and other mass organisations have neither moved into, nor shown any resilience or proclivity to move into, several important issues. Even though the historic and valuable role of political parties and other mass organisations cannot be, and should not be, denied (and here I agree with Ajit Roy), they continue to ignore issues (and here I disagree with Ajit Roy). Take the Bhopal disaster, for example. When thousands have died and hundreds of thousands are sufferring even today, none of the parties or mass organisations (like national trade union centres) took the initiative to act in Bhopal or outside. Only social activists, from Bhopal and elsewhere, jumped into the situation and have since continued to work with the local people. Were it not for these handful of social activists struggling in Bhopal, there would have been no relief, no protest, no authentic information in Bhopal, and a major disaster and the issues it raises would have gone unnoticed. This is the kind of political space where social action groups can, and must, operate.

3. Macro-linkages

There is a broad agreement among social action groups that micro-action alone will not bring all the results. They themselves recognise the need for macro-action. However, this macro-action has mostly taken either of the two forms. The first form has been macro-action on behalf of social action groups by some macro-organisations—be they 'participatory researchers' (as Bunker Roy would have them labelled) or advocates or networks or whatever. The second form has been to form federations of social action groups, at state or central levels. Both these forms have proved largely ineffective. The former remains only macro (without micro linkages) and the latter prematurely creates divisions between members (of the federation) and non-members. However,

an increasingly popular form that appears promising is the coming together of action groups around a particular set of issues. This has been effectively done, at both state and central levels, around issues like deforestation, land alienation, women's concerns. health care etc. This has the potential of transcending micro limitations by coming and acting together on a set of issues and forming macro linkages.

4. Industrial and rural linkages

Finally, an important missing link in social action and people's movements has been the separation between the industrial working class and the rural poor. Most social action groups work with the rural poor (and some with the urban poor as well). But there has been very little interaction between activists from social action groups and those from trade unions, for example. This lack of interaction has also led to a lack of linkages between these two sets of organisations. It is perhaps important to recognise the value of such linkages, because their coming together can substantially enhance their collective strength. Some small efforts in this direction have been recently made in some parts of the country. An example is a recent initiative to bring together trade unions, rural organisations, environmentalists and social action groups on the issues raised by the Bhopal disaster. This kind of initiatives on a concrete issue can pave the way for much broader linkages in the future. The important thing seems to be the recognition, among social action groups and the industrial workers' organisations, of the importance of such linkages.

D. Complex Issue (*Nalini Nayak*)

With the task of having to respond to the paper by Ajit Roy, Harsh Sethi, Bunker Roy and Philip Viegas, I realise the complexity of the task ahead for the following reasons.

1. Those who consider themselves members of action groups for whatever reasons they may have, are forced to confine themselves as Bunker says, to particular issues by those who feel it their task to build up a 'sociology' of the phenomenon.

2. This process leads naturally to what Harsh writes about in his 'Ode to Hurt Innocence', 'camps get formed which demand

their loyalties, and as the discourse sharpens, so does the demand to prove loyalty.'

3. The new dynamics evolving from the phenomenon of the action of the action groups may mean something significantly different in each context. For example, a people's organisation may mean a workers' union in one area or a multiclass group in a consumer association context. The ambiguities that thus arise add more confusion and frustrate the participants in the debate.

4. It is significant to note that the initiators of the debate did not raise the issue on the ego base of action groups which has a lot to do with the mushrooming of action groups in the absence of the united struggles they claim to uphold. Charismatic leadership, on the other hand is the success of some groups, but again then the theoretical question will be raised—how can the process be duplicated?

I personally feel that one would understand the phenomenon better if one tried to trace the biography of the groups. This would also help to clarify misconceptions regarding strategies of organisations which may rid 'such writing preoccupied as it is with defence or attack, displaying a sense of insecurity' (Sethi).

E. Going Beyond Present Issues (*Walter Fernandes*)

I tend to agree with of what Ajit Roy says. I go along with him when he says that the questions discussed remain more or less the same which perhaps is an indication of the plateau which most Action Groups have reached. However, I would add that the understanding of these questions changes with the new groups of the 1980s which have similar queries in a different context. Many of these groups have taken new initiatives. Unlike most groups of the 1970s that made a mobilisation-economic development dichotomy, the new groups attempt to use issues such as health, environment, women's rights and others as tools for mobilisation. They attempt to combine economic and educational inputs. Hence it may be useful to discuss the same questions in the new context of these new initiatives and search for new answers to old questions.

While agreeing that the parties have to be involved in macro-action, it may be useful to add that many of these issues that have been taken up at the national level have so far been ignored by

the political parties. If any party had taken them up, it is mostly as a result of the initial mobilisation facilitated by action groups and other non-party organisation. This has to some extent show the need of new forms of relationship with political parties and it would be useful to continue this search.

On the other hand, I would not agree with Bunker Roy when he says that most issues discussed are irrelevant as far as the people are concerned. The role of the activists is important in supporting the people's movements and the discussion in these papers is on problems of activists in their work among the people, and not directly the oppressed sections themselves. Obviously, these do not concern the people directly, but an attempt to help activists become more relevant to the people. As Bunker himself has noticed, there is a clear difference between those who are directly involved with the people and those who are in macro-institutions. Hence their replies are different without whispering in their ears which is difficult when the postal system is used for the interviews. The security of the activists has to be taken into consideration. Here we are refering only to financial security and not the rest of the insecurity the activists are prepared to live with.

Issues concerning women would need to be given more importance than most writers have done. This insufficient attention given to the question is, perhaps, an indication of the male domination of the action groups. In that sense, I would think that one need not attribute, this shortcoming to the 'Marxist ideology' of feminist as Ginny Shrivastava would imply, but to the internalisation of male values even by those who work for social change. The power of knowledge, as Shrivastava says, is a tool of domination and very few action groups seems to value the knowledge of women or make them sharers in their new knowledge. One is surprised that except a woman who was specifically asked to comment on women's issues, no other commentator has discussed women's issues. Perhaps, this is an indication of a certain situation and this discussion may be a take off point for further analysis of our society.

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Index

Action, 6, 10, 18, 23, 24, 27, 55, 56, 60, 62, 64, 85, 89, 97, 103, 104, 105; Christian, 5; collective, 16, 147; group, 1, 2, 3, 5-31, 97-99, 101, 103-109, 111, 117, 129, 134, 141, 144, 151, 152, 155, 157, 161, 165, 167, 173, 174; legal, 110; local, 53, 60; macro, 173; mass, 93, 96, 97; micro, 54, 103, 104, 173; political, 95, 159; requirements of, 26 and research, 105; social, 30, 64, 68, 73, 111, 119, 122; voluntary, 48, 57, 89, 102

Activism, 98, 99

Activist, 2, 4, 5, 7-9, 11, 18, 23-25, 30, 40, 41, 43, 51-55, 57-60, 88-96, 97, 98, 100, 102-105, 108, 109, 111, 112, 150, 164, 171; educator, 148; full time, 108; legal, 119; middle class, 64; outside, 103, 105; security of, 99; social, 4-8, 95, 100, 111; true, 18

Agency, 6, 101; donor, 5, 26; funding, 5, 100, 101, 141; government, 106; voluntary, 3, 155

Aid/(funds), external, 109; foreign, 98-101, 103, 106-109, 133, 137; government, 137; *See Agency*

Alternative, 2, 7-11; approach, 6; form, 3; non-party, 9; search for, 9

Analysis, 24, 28; critical, 23; people's, 23; social, 18, 23, 24, 153

Animators, 51, 69, 70, 73-88

Approach, 52, 54, 56, 88, 90, 94, 95; participatory, 55, 59; *See Alternative*

Attitude, 40, 44

Awareness raising, 73

Bureaucracy, 59, 67, 72, 79, 83, 94, 101

Caste, 52, 92, 95, 143; dominant, 65; hierarchy, 66, 161; scheduled, 2, 58; subordinate, 65; system, 166

Catalyst, 148, 159

Class, 4, 18, 49, 53, 61, 64, 83, 86, 89, 95, 103, 108, 109; culture, 11, 18 dominant; 62, 64, 65; exploited, 111; landed, 72; middle, 19, 29, 49, 73, 86, 89, 92; oppressed, 108; ruling, 3, 9, 62, 68, 94, 144; subordinate, 65; working, 10, 32, 58, 103, 108

Colonialism, 66, 165

Conscientisation, 19, 20, 102

Consciousness, 5, 23, 31; level of, 16, 27; moral, 31; political, 6; revolutionary, 106

Co-optation, 156, 159, 160

Corruption, 62, 84, 170

Dalit, 35, 37, 132

Decision making, 48, 56, 149; democratic, 97

Dependency, 10, 27, 137, 138; hidden, 29

Development, 1, 2, 5, 13, 14, 16, 18-21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 49-51, 55, 56, 58, 60, 74, 86, 87, 95, 98, 111, 167; activity, 100, 101; cerebral, 16; economic, 19; pattern of, 17; policy, 21; project, 18-20; rural, 3, 14, 20; victim of, 13, 20
Dichotomies, 103-105
Disillusionment, 49, 53, 55, 57, 58
Domination, 62, 64, 105; foreign, 65; ruling classes, 65
Dowry, 40, 43, 79, 80

Education, 62, 64-66, 77, 95, 106, 146; conventional, 62; political, 50; popular, 62, 69; university, 53
Elite, 66, 80, 83
Exploitation, 5, 19, 24, 29, 33, 39, 62, 65, 69, 74, 78, 84, 85, 96, 104, 170, 172

Fascist, 144
Feudal, 65

Government, 86, 92; *See Agency and Aid*

Hierarchy, 65, 66, 92, 161; *See Caste*
Human rights, 13, 30, 31

Ideology, 6, 18, 23, 50, 53, 54, 92, 93, 96, 111, 112; radical, 102
Inequality, 7, 103
Injustice, 62, 63; colonial, 67
Institutions, 49, 52, 54, 57, 58, 60, 62, 63, 91, 94; academic, 107; macro, 60; research, 89

Labour, 22, 23; bonded, 28; cheap, 19
Labourers, agricultural, 2, 51; bonded, 17, 21, 28, 122, 123; landless, 2, 3, 17, 29, 51, 58, 61, 62, 69, 70, 72, 73, 74, 76-80, 85, 87, 168; women, 168; *See Women*
Landless, 106, 108; *See Labourers*
Landlord, 36, 37, 38, 42, 43, 70, 74 75, 82, 85, 104, landowner, 67
Liberation, 18, 20, 64; national, 98; movement, 63; social, 16, 27, 30; struggle theology, 4, 7; *See Movements*; *Struggle*
Litigation, 94; public interest, 140; social action, 119, 122

Marginalised, 2, 4, 8; group, 4, 7-12; poor, 14; section, 11, 48, 130, 137, 161, 167
Marxist, 153
Masses, 4, 8, 13, 30, 105; of the people, 31; support of, 5
Mobilisation, 50, 61, 63, 86, 93, 100; of the poor, 102; problems of, 101
Moneylender, 69, 78-80, 82, 83, 97, 104
Movements, 5, 13, 15, 18, 20, 21, 23, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 41, 51, 55, 56, 58, 61, 64, 65, 72, 87, 88, 95, 100, 102, 109; bhakti, 66; class, 58; *See* class-based, 35, 38, 39, 42,43; chipko, 115; cultural, 64; dalit, 37, 42 farmers, 52; freedom, 102; independence, 102; left, 43, 44; nationalist, 41, 63, 74, 143; people's, 33, 44, 57, 58, 86, 89, 93; 101-103, 109, 147; popular, 67, 68; women's, 32-34, 36-47, 151; workers, 32; *See Class*; *Dalit*; *Nationalist*; *Women's*; *Workers*

Nationalist, 64, 67, 68

Oppressed caste, 67; groups, 61, 97, 104; people, 93, 104; *See Caste*; *Class*
Oppression, 33, 39, 42, 51, 62-65, 72, 73, 80, 85; caste, 67; police, 98; *See Caste*
Oppresser, 97, 104; police 98

Participation, 48, 50, 52, 62, 65, 95, 96

000641

Party, 6, 9, 10, 14, 49, 55, 56, 58, 59, 95, 103, 104, 107; communist, 5, 103, 131, 142; Janata, 142, 143; left, 2-6, 8-10, 14, 25, 55, 58, 97, 103, 107, 130; Marxist, 5; non-political, 151; political, 50-52, 57-60, 88, 89, 91-94, 96, 101, 103, 130, 141, 173; right, 4, 8; structure, 104; *See Structure*
Peasants, 61, 64, 65, 69, 73, 85, 87
People, 7, 13-17, 19, 21-24, 26-29; awakened, 15, 31; capacity of, 30; instigate, 19; learn from, 24; middle-class, 18; relationship with, 23; search with 18; work with, 10, 16; *See Class*
macro, Perspective, 103
Polarisation, 97
Police 41, 43
Politicisation, 98
Power, 158, 166
Process, 56, 58, 64, 82, 85, 86, 89, 90
Production, 50, 54, 114

Rape, 36-39, 42, 43
Reform, 106, 141
Reformism, 106
Reformist, 105, 106, 157
Relations, family, 33; symbiotic, 55
Religion, 4, 103; danger to, 5
Research, 103, 105; participatory, 105, 148, 173
Resources, 1, 21, 101; development of, 21; financial, 3
Revolution, 58, 68, 103, 106, 141, 152, 167; consciousness, 106; counter, 106; force, 105; revolutionary, 157
Rural, 63, 81, 90, 92, 95, 109; area, 1, 9; peasants 69; poor, 1, 2, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 24, 27, 29-31, 103, 112, 134, 168; poverty, 20; *See Development*; *Peasants*

Sectarianism, 109
Section, dominant; 50, 58; weaker, 49, 50, 52
Security, 99
Self-image, 38, 39, 51, 52
Self-reliance, 1, 50, 56, 82, 86
Shramik Sangathan, 35
Solidarity, 97, 104, 139
Stability, locational, 162, 164; group 162
Status quo, 142
Strategy, 2, 5, 6, 12, 16, 20; developing, 27, 30; relevant, 12; right, 7
Structures, 1, 15, 25, 50, 59, 60, 62, 64, 88, 90, 104; exploitative, 30, 104; feudal, 68; political, 155, 157, 161; regional, 15; rural, 68; *Rural* top-down, 69; *See Feudal*
Struggle, 4, 16, 53, 54, 56, 57, 60-64 105, 111, 112; anti-establishment, 33; beginning of, 104; class, 65, 80, 130; for justice, 19, 24, 28; long term, 105; micro-struggle, 54; nationalist, 67; people's 4, 151; revolutionary, 4; for rights, 5; women's, 169; *Nationalist*; *See Class*

Technology, 1, 49, 57, 80, 97;appropriate, 106
Terrorist, 113
Theatre, 62-64, 68, 72, 73; people's, 7, 61, 64-66, 148; popular 63; urban, 66
Theory, 104, 105
Transformation, 104; social, 14

Unions, 93; political, 36; trade, 34, 36, 39, 40, 44, 89, 94
Unity, 102; organisational, 73
Untouchable, 106, 107
Upsurge, 143
Urban, 1, 68, 95; *See Theatre*

Vested interests, 4, 5, 10, 12, 21, 39, 40, 54, 58, 97
Victimisation, 70, 72, 73, 78, 84, 87

Wages, 143, 146; minimum (act), 115
Withdrawal, 139, 162, 163

Women, 7, 11, 13, 32, 97, 102, 103; classes of 11; involvement of, 11; issues, 106; social activists, 149, 151-153; rights of, 7; role of, 7, 11
Workers, 34, 61, 64, 89, 90; *beedi*, 44; domestic, 36; social, 91

While some think that social activists are a force to reckon with in view of their involvement in people's movements, others are of the view that Action Groups are a marginal phenomenon. These groups originated in the 1960s as a response to the changing political and economic situation. They were often viewed as an alternative favourable to the unorganised sectors, particularly the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who were till then ignored by all including political parties.

Have these hopes been belied or do social activists still have a future? Can they still become a third force as some hope? These questions are discussed in the present book as part of the ongoing debate on people's movements, social change and political alliances. It is meant to be a contribution to the task of facilitating change in the country's socio-economic structures that tend to marginalise the majority in order to transfer wealth and power to a small minority.

Dr Walter Fernandes is Director of the Indian Social Institute and Editor of *Social Action*.

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